

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

**“Shalom, Shalom, Shalom Israel!”
Jews and Judaism in Helmut Gollwitzer’s
Life and Theology**

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Helmut Gollwitzer was one of Karl Barth’s most significant students for a number of reasons, and not least among these was his deep-seated commitment to establishing a positive relationship between Christianity and Judaism.¹ This

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¹ Gollwitzer is perhaps best known for his political theology insofar as he engaged in extensive critical interaction with Marxism while himself advocating a form of democratic socialism. See, for example, Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Christian faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970); “Muß ein Christ Sozialist sein?,” in *Forderungen der Umkehr: Beiträge zur Theologie der Gesellschaft* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1976), 162–78. For an overview of Gollwitzer’s political activism, see Claudia Lepp, “Helmut Gollwitzer als Dialogpartner der sozialen Bewegungen,” *Umbrüche: Der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren*, Siegfried Hermle, Claudia Lepp, Harry Oelke, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 226–46. But Gollwitzer’s interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue and his commitment to rethinking Christian treatments of Jews and Judaism were also central aspects of his post-war thought. This is sometimes missed in English-language scholarship, perhaps in part because the three essays on “Antisemitismus” in his *Forderungen der Freiheit* were not included in the English translation. Helmut Gollwitzer, *Forderungen der Freiheit: Aufsätze und Reden zur politischen Ethik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), 247–74; cf. *The Demands of Freedom: Papers by a Christian in West Germany*, translated by Robert W. Fenn (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965). However, few studies of Gollwitzer’s life and thought in general—and especially his work in Jewish-Christian dialogue—exist even in German. This essay thus intends to advance scholarship in

relationship had been poisoned in Gollwitzer's lifetime by the horrible actions of Germany's National Socialist regime leading up to and during the Second World War. But Gollwitzer also recognized that the seed of antisemitism, which all too easily flowers and has flowered into devastating forms of oppression, had long been planted in and nourished by established patterns of Christian discourse. Gollwitzer relied heavily on what Andreas Pangritz refers to as Gollwitzer's "genius of friendship"² in his efforts to repair this relationship. In his ability to be with others in true solidarity, Gollwitzer embodied in his life the sort of rapprochement necessary between what he preferred to think of not as two different religions but as two "confessions" or "denominations" (*Konfessionen*) of a single faith.³ A consideration of Gollwitzer's biography reveals the complimentary point that Gollwitzer came to these convictions through his propensity for friendship. What follows brings Gollwitzer's biography together with key intellectual moments in his engagement with the question of Jewish-Christian relations to indicate how important relationships and experiences impacted his thought on the topic.

I.

Gollwitzer was born "the son of an evangelical-Lutheran pastor in Bavaria" on December 29, 1908.⁴ His fa-

this area of neglect, and especially to bring more balance to treatments of Gollwitzer in English-language circles.

² Andreas Pangritz, "Helmut Gollwitzer Als Theologe Des Dialogs" (Public lecture at Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn, December 3, 2008), 1.

³ Helmut Gollwitzer, "Martin Bubers Bedeutung Für Die Protestantische Theologie," in *Leben Als Begegnung: Ein Jahrhundert Martin Buber (1878-1978), Vorträge Und Aufsätze*, Peter von der Osten-Sacken, ed. (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1982), 64.

⁴ Helmut Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens: Aus Verstreuten Selbstzeugnissen Gefunden Und Verbunden Von Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Wolfgang Brinkel Und Manfred Weber* (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser Verlagshaus, 1998), 11. This is currently the definitive source for Gollwitzer's biography, and my discussion of his life relies on it unless otherwise indicated. It is perhaps worth noting that this work is not, strictly

ther possessed conservative socio-political instincts that included a poor opinion of Jews. As Gollwitzer put it later when reflecting back on his childhood, “just as the average Protestant was middle class and ‘national,’ he was also anti-Semitic.”⁵ The theological conservatism of Gollwitzer’s father mitigated somewhat the effects of this antisemitism. He taught his children that the Jews of the Old Testament period were a noble people, but that God rejected them in response to their rejection of Jesus “and since that time they have been merchants, good for nothing, and they infiltrate everything, everywhere they go.” This concern for infiltration was the moral of the story, for “against that you had to defend yourself.”⁶ But Gollwitzer defends his parents, saying that “there was no malicious [*bösartiger*] antisemitism in my parent’s house” and that personal encounters with friendly Jewish people opened up different possibilities for thought. Furthermore, Gollwitzer makes it clear that “we were taught as children that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was not the fault [*Schuld*] of Jews, but that it was a result of all our guilt [*Schuld*].”⁷

What we might call Gollwitzer’s “unreflective” anti-semitism persisted into the 1920s.⁸ In an event known as the Beer Hall Putsch in early November, 1923, Adolf Hitler declared himself the chancellor of Bavaria and proclaimed the establishment of a new national government. But when he

speaking, a work of autobiography. Rather, it is the editorial integration of various autobiographical comments made and reflections produced by Gollwitzer in diverse contexts and genres. These materials from Gollwitzer are ensconced in editorial comments that unite them as a single narrative, tie them to Gollwitzer’s bibliography, and provide other informative discussions. That said, the task of composing a truly critical biography of Gollwitzer remains as yet unfulfilled.

⁵ Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15.

⁶ Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 15. See also Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 30.

⁷ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 31.

⁸ Later in life Gollwitzer noted that after the *Shoah* “you can hardly speak of ‘harmless’ anti-Semitism, but at that time we saw the antipathy toward the Jews as harmless.” Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 15.

failed to immediately enlist police and military forces in support of his cause, the large National Socialist rally was dispersed by machine-gun fire and Hitler was arrested shortly thereafter. It is in the context of such remembrances that Gollwitzer reflects on his opinions of Jews at that time: “A Jew is not a German, and cannot be a German, because there is a profound difference in nature between Jews and Germans.” These aspects of Gollwitzer’s early life—the events in Munich and his own early view of Jews—cohere in his mind because at that time he was a messenger boy for the SA in the Bavarian city of Lindau.⁹ The critical shift for Gollwitzer seems to have begun in 1925 when he entered the well-regarded St. Anna *Gymnasium* in Augsburg. He graduated in 1928. Gollwitzer recognized a change in perspective during this period, and it came not primarily through the course of study but through personal interaction. Through personal encounter he learned that “pacifists are not necessarily cowards, despicable socialists are not necessarily November-criminals, and Jews are not necessarily damned by God.”¹⁰

After leaving St. Anna’s Gollwitzer studied theology at Erlangen and Jena before arriving in Bonn for the summer semester in 1930. He was there to study with Karl Barth. This marked a decisive break in Gollwitzer’s life with a past that he intended to leave behind. Part of that past was active involvement during the previous decades in various aspects of the nationalist German youth movement. To symbolize this break, Gollwitzer burned his poetry and his correspondence.¹¹

⁹ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 28.

¹⁰ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 40. The stereotypes here are all associated with the various “stab in the back” myths that circulated during the Weimar period, blaming Germany’s defeat in World War I on political sabotage by the sort of socially marginalized groups mentioned above.

¹¹ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 55, 57. The unavailability of these materials makes it difficult to develop a critical understanding of Gollwitzer’s early socio-political outlook. Between his function as an SA messenger boy and his other youth movement connections, it is hard to resist the inference that Gollwitzer had real sympathies with National Socialism in the 1920s that he only gradually but—in the end—decisively overcame. In this Helmut would have been ahead of his father. The elder Gollwitzer initially

Now his commitment would be to dialectical theology. As Barth's student, it was natural for Gollwitzer to be connected with the Confessing Church movement that developed in response to how National Socialist supporters within the church—the German Christians—sought to apply the government's employment policies in the ecclesiastical context. Perhaps the most important of these applications was the so-called "Aryan paragraph" of 1933. This stipulation required that any pastor "of non-Aryan extraction, or [who] is married to a person of non-Aryan extraction" be removed from their positions.¹² This statement foreclosed on the issue of how to treat those who were ethnically Jewish but had converted to Christianity, or who descended from families who had converted in previous generations, and become pastors. Should they be considered Jews? Christians? Germans? For the German Christians, the answer was simple: they were Jews. The Pastors' Emergency League formed as a way to address the needs of those who had lost their positions, and it later became an important piece in the mosaic of constituencies that formed the Confessing Church.

It is increasingly well known that the Confessing Church's activism in support of its deposed ethnically Jewish pastors did not extend to non-Christian Jews. Indeed, "for the mainstream Protestant church, and even within most of the Confessing Church, the question of church advocacy on behalf of non-Christian Jews did not even arise."¹³ Although it seems

placed great hope in National Socialism and only became disabused of that hope when what he saw as improper government interference in the churches drove him toward the Confessing Church (21).

¹² As quoted in Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*, translated and edited by Victoria J. Barnett (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 25. See pp. 17-18 for a discussion of the Reich Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which articulated the policy that the German Christians moved to apply within the church.

¹³ Barnett, *For the Soul of the People*, 128. Gerlach corroborates: "There would never be much support within the Confessing Church for leading a protest against Nazi racial policies." Gerlach, *And the Witnesses Were Silent*, 100. Along these same lines it is possible to criticize the much

certain that Gollwitzer would have been aware of more clear-sighted thinking concerning the Jews under the conditions of National Socialism, such as that provided by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer,¹⁴ Gollwitzer occupied himself in the Confessing Church's early years with other issues. For instance, he wrote an essay against the "Führer-principle" that dealt with the proper shape of authority in the church.¹⁵ He also wrote about the nature of the Lord's Supper in an effort to remove obstacles to greater Confessing Church cooperation between those from the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. This latter effort culminated in his dissertation, *Coena Domini*, published in 1937.¹⁶ These confessional divisions plagued the movement and undermined its effectiveness at critical moments.¹⁷ Gollwitzer also became close in the mid-1930s to

lauded Barmen Declaration as overly theological and insufficiently political in its statements, especially with reference to the Jewish Question. This was by design. The Confessing Church did not want to be "a political resistance group in the Third Reich." Klaus Scholder, *The Churches of the Third Reich*, vol. 2, *The Year of Disillusionment: 1934, Barmen and Rome* (Philadelphia, PA: Forterss Press, 1988), 150.

¹⁴ Barth's influence on Gollwitzer need not be argued in detail, but it may be worth noting that Gollwitzer was Barth's student during this period and even served as his *famulus* (i.e., teaching assistant) during 1931. See Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 70. As for Bonhoeffer, he visited Barth in Bonn toward the end of the 1931 Summer Semester and met with a group of Barth's students. This meeting occurred in Gollwitzer's student lodgings (60).

¹⁵ Helmut Gollwitzer, "Amt und 'Führertum' in der Kirche," *Evangelische Theologie* 1 (1934), 79-113.

¹⁶ Helmut Gollwitzer, "Die Abendmahlsfrage als Aufgabe kirchlicher Lehre," *Theologische Aufsätze: Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag*, Ernst Wolfe, ed. (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1936), 275-98; Helmut Gollwitzer, *Coena Domini: Die Altlutherische Abendmahlslehre in Ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit dem Calvinismus, Dargestellt an Der Lutherischen Frühorthodoxie, mit einer Einführung zur Neuauflage von Dietrich Braun* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1937/1988). Concerning Gollwitzer's participation in the Confessing Church, see Dietrich Braun, "Helmut Gollwitzer in Den Jahren Des Kirchenkampfes 1934-1938" in Helmut Gollwitzer, *Coena Domini*.

¹⁷ For more on how confessional differences within the Confessing Church were exploited by the Third Reich, see Scholder, *Church of the Third Reich*, vol. 2, esp. 150-66.

Martin Niemöller, an important Confessing Church leader and pastor in the Berlin district of Dahlem. Gollwitzer arrived in Berlin on May 1, 1937, and Niemöller was arrested on July 1. Although acquitted by judicial decision in 1938, Hitler personally intervened to send Niemöller to a concentration camp as a “personal prisoner of the Führer”¹⁸ and he remained as such until the end of the Reich.

Gollwitzer replaced Niemöller in the Dahlem pulpit. This is significant not only because Dahlem was a wealthy area and home to many important National Socialist officials, but also because the Dahlem church had non-Aryan pastors and members from important families of Jewish origin.¹⁹ This personal contact seems to have sharpened the Jewish question for Gollwitzer. The yearly Day of Repentance (*Bußtag*) of the German church fell six days after the November 1938 pogrom, and Gollwitzer preached a sermon in Dahlem on Luke 3:3-14 that urged his hearers to repent of their failings and practice “unreserved solidarity with the ostracized Jews” as part of their commitment to the gospel.²⁰ Gollwitzer speaks

¹⁸ Braun, “Helmut Gollwitzer in Den Jahren Des Kirchenkampfes 1934-1938,” 95.

¹⁹ Paul Oestreicher writes concerning Dahlem: “Not only was this one of the wealthiest suburbs of the German capital, but in it lived a high proportion of the most influential and powerful people in Nazi Germany. To preach the Gospel here was to preach it in the open jaws of hell.” Paul Oestreicher, “Helmut Gollwitzer in the European Storms” in Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Demands of Freedom*, 14. On the non-Aryan presence in Dahlem, see Braun, “Helmut Gollwitzer in Den Jahren Des Kirchenkampfes 1934-1938,” 98.

²⁰ Braun, “Helmut Gollwitzer in Den Jahren Des Kirchenkampfes 1934-1938,” 99. This sermon has recently been translated into English. See Helmut Gollwitzer, “A Sermon About *Kristallnacht*,” in *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich*, Dean G. Stroud, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013). Stroud makes two minor historical errors. First, he dates the pogrom as occurring on the night of November 8-9 (116), but it occurred on the night of November 9-10. Second, he correctly dates Gollwitzer's sermon as delivered on November 16, but he incorrectly identifies this as a Sunday (117). It was a Wednesday. It may be that Stroud is unaware of the *Bußtag* tradition in the German Protestant church, leading him to incorrectly surmise that the Sunday following the pogrom was declared a “Day of Penance.”

carefully but clearly in this sermon. He begins by emphasizing the need for Christians to repent of their failure to love their neighbors in need. They have “exchanged God’s standard for the standard of current political propaganda” and have demonstrated “that upright men and women can turn into horrible beasts.” As a result, Gollwitzer proclaims to his hearers that “God is disgusted at the very sight of you.” Furthermore, what distinguishes a person as “called into the kingdom (*Reich*) of heaven”—and the contrast to those who are rather to be counted as members of the German *Reich* is all the more powerful in remaining implicit—is that such a one “lets himself be talked to in this way.”²¹

After preaching God’s disgust, Gollwitzer preaches the antecedent and fundamental character of God’s love. “The negation of life that belongs to repentance comes from a tremendous affirmation of God.... God has loved this brood of vipers.” This love and affirmation of life raise for Gollwitzer the important question, given to him by his text, “What then should we do?”²² And just as does Jesus in Luke’s gospel, so Gollwitzer in his sermon answers this question by pointing to concrete acts of love for one’s neighbor. According to Gollwitzer’s definition, the neighbor is anyone who “lacks what you have.” The only way to address such need is through action. “God wants to see deeds,” Gollwitzer proclaims, “good works [done] by those who have fled divine wrath with the help of Christ.”²³ In closing Gollwitzer sets the challenge still more clearly before his hearers with these weighty words: “Now just outside this church our neighbor is waiting for us—waiting for us in his need and lack of protection, disgraced, hungry, hunted, and driven by fear for his very existence. That is the one who is waiting to see if today this Christian congregation has really observed this national day of penance. Jesus Christ himself is waiting to see. Amen.”

²¹ Gollwitzer, “A Sermon About *Kristallnacht*,” 122.

²² Gollwitzer, “A Sermon About *Kristallnacht*,” 124. See Luke 3:10.

²³ Gollwitzer, “A Sermon About *Kristallnacht*,” 125.

In addition to his pastoral work at Dahlem, Gollwitzer's personal life would bind him more closely to the sufferings of Jews in those years. On August 25, 1940, Helmut Gollwitzer met Eva Bildt.²⁴ Eva was a singer and actress whose dream of a professional career, along with the rest of her life, was derailed under the Nazi *Reich* because of her Jewish mother. Her father Paul Bildt's status as an Aryan and state-sponsored actor provided a modicum of protection to his wife and daughter, although as the years progressed this protection seemed increasingly feeble. Arrest and transfer to a camp was a constant threat. Helmut and Eva rapidly fell in love, becoming officially engaged in January of 1941. The period of their courtship was an uncertain time. Helmut was issued a gag-order shortly after they met, and was conscripted soon after that. The couple required special permission to marry due to Eva's part-Aryan status and for a time it looked like they would receive it. But this fell apart when the potential groom's identity was discovered. A steady stream of letters passed between them when Helmut was deployed to the French and later the Russian fronts. Eva became increasingly depressed as the war continued. The Bildt home was destroyed by bombing in early 1944, and both Eva's parents became very ill. Her mother died in March of 1945, Berlin was occupied on April 26, and on April 27 Eva and her apparently terminally ill father attempted suicide through barbiturate overdose.²⁵ Eva succeeded. Her father made a full recovery and lived until 1957. Meanwhile, Gollwitzer was captured and sent to Russia as a prisoner of war. He would remain there until the end of 1949. In the autumn of 1946 Helmut learned of the death of Eva and other loved ones in the first correspondence that he

²⁴ Narration of Eva and Helmut's relationship draws upon the following: Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 152-59; Helmut Gollwitzer and Eva Bildt, *Ich Will Dir Schnell Sagen, Daß Ich Lebe, Liebster: Brief aus dem Krieg 1940-1945*, Friedrich Künzel and Ruth Pabst, ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2008), 9-13.

²⁵ Gollwitzer and Bildt, *Ich Will Dir Schnell Sagen*, 317.

received in Soviet custody. He describes his reaction: “I ran howling into the woods.”²⁶

II.

Gollwitzer’s engagement with Jews and Judaism entered a new phase upon his release from captivity and return to West Germany, otherwise known as the Bonn Republic, on New Year’s Eve in 1949.²⁷ He was awarded the post of *ordinarius* professor of theology at the University of Bonn on January 31, 1950.²⁸ It was during the intervening weeks that a romantic relationship began to develop between Gollwitzer and Brigitte Freudenberg. Brigitte’s father Adolf had been with the German Foreign Service, but two things led him to re-think his career.²⁹ First, he was married to a secular Jew. Second, he and his wife fell under the influence of Martin Niemöller and shifted from conventional religious concern to intense Christian commitment. Adolf left the service in 1935 before they could dismiss him, moved his family to Dahlem in 1936, and began studying to become a pastor in the Confessing Church. Brigitte was confirmed by Niemöller, and the Freudenbergs became a surrogate family—second only to the Niemöllers—for the young and unattached Gollwitzer. Through a complex set of circumstances the Freudenberg

²⁶ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 228. There is some discrepancy here as the correspondence provided does not explicitly indicate that he learned of Eva’s death in that first delivery of mail. But knowledgeable sources indicate that he did. See Gollwitzer and Bildt, *Ich Will Dir Schnell Sagen*, 317.

²⁷ Helmut Gollwitzer, *Unwilling Journey: A Diary from Russia*, E. M. Delacour and Robert Fenn, trans. (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1953), 309.

²⁸ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 249. Although Gollwitzer was given the position on January 31, the university credited him with an effective start date of November 1, 1949.

²⁹ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 251. My narration concerning the Freudenbergs and Gollwitzer’s wedding is drawn from pp. 251–60. For more on Adolf Freudenberg, including his ecumenical relief work on behalf of Jewish refugees during the war, see Hartmut Ludwig, “‘Christians Cannot Remain Silent about This Crime’: On the Centenary of the Birth of Adolf Freudenberg,” *Ecumenical Review* 46:4 (1994): 475–85.

family landed in Switzerland for the duration of the war, and Brigitte suffered the death of a young man to whom she was secretly engaged. She undertook a certificate program in Switzerland for women to receive some ministerial training. Brigitte was the first of her family to return to Germany after the war, which she did in October of 1945 to work in Frankfurt (am Main) with a Confessing Church pastor doing children's ministry and church-based relief work. Gollwitzer stopped to see Brigitte while on the way from Bavaria to Bonn to assume his professorship. Their relationship blossomed rapidly, undoubtedly expedited by their previous acquaintance, similar experiences of wartime loss, and commitment to the Confessing Church. They declared their love for each other by the end of July but planned to wait a year to wed in order to give them both an opportunity for further reflection. But in the end they were married on March 31, 1951. The wedding occurred in the midst of life's demands. It was held in the bomb-damaged church in Frankfurt where Brigitte had been working. The sermon was preached by Niemöller. And because of a nearby conference, at which Gollwitzer spoke, Karl Barth and other "theological friends" were able to attend.³⁰

Helmut's relationship with Brigitte continued the process begun years earlier and further galvanized his desire to reconceive the relationship between Christians and Jews both personally and theologically. Furthermore, it was likely Brigitte who initiated the couple's trip to Israel in 1958.³¹ This trip was an important moment for Gollwitzer. On May 10 of that same year, the ten-year anniversary of the modern state of Israel's founding, Gollwitzer gave a commemorative speech drawing on the impressions he gained during his trip. By this time Gollwitzer had moved to the Free University of Berlin, and

³⁰ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 260.

³¹ Two pieces of evidence suggest that the impetus came from Brigitte. First, her parents accompanied them on the trip. See Pangritz, "Helmut Gollwitzer Als Theologe Des Dialogs," 5. Second, she was committed to returning to Israel with some regularity. See Gottfried Orth, *Helmut Gollwitzer: Zur Solidarität Befreit* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald Verlag, 1995), 60.

this public speech was held in its largest auditorium.³² The title was “Israel and Us,” where the “us” in question stood both for the Bonn Republic as a socio-political entity and for its citizens as Christians. As Gollwitzer points out at the start, the existence of Israel affects his audience “more deeply than the existence of any other foreign country.”³³

Gollwitzer’s speech is overwhelmingly positive, but not unreflectively so. “It is not about setting a blind philosemitism in the place of a blind antisemitism,” he maintains toward the end of the speech, noting also that reports about Israel are “too easily enthusiastic” and “ignore the enormous problems” in play.³⁴ He further blames the geopolitical meddling of the Western and Eastern powers for stoking the flames of hatred and heightening the political tensions between Israel and the neighboring Arab nations.³⁵ In the face of such a situation it is no wonder that Israel must pay a great deal of attention to its military and national security, but Gollwitzer maintains that Israel also recognizes that its future depends on the establishment of true peace.³⁶ On the way to his conclusion Gollwitzer even offers what might be thought of as a warning to Israel: “Part of Jewry has now achieved the ability to live like other peoples also.... In its new existence, Israel will prove that it can live like other peoples only if it knows that it is not like other peoples, that a particular task is intended for it for the benefit of everyone else.” But he ends in a more positive voice. Gollwitzer draws on the logic of Genesis 12:3—even quoting the first part of the verse—to suggest that blessing and curse are historical realities. With World War II fresh in his mind and the minds of his hearers, Gollwitzer proposes that the world stands in need of some blessing. He urges the audience to do what they can to support and share in Israel’s special task. Thus, and in conclusion, Gollwitzer takes the lead

³² Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 282.

³³ Helmut Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir* (Berlin: Lettner Verlag, 1958), 5.

³⁴ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 27-28.

³⁵ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 27.

³⁶ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 25.

in pronouncing a blessing “toward Palestine: Shalom, Shalom, Shalom Israel!”³⁷

That Gollwitzer is overwhelmingly positive in this speech is perhaps no surprise given the speech’s context both geopolitically and in Gollwitzer’s biography. But it is instructive to examine the reasons that Gollwitzer supplies in this speech for his positive approach. He thinks the state of Israel is important in view of three “moments”: sociological, moral, and theological.³⁸ The moral moment is the most straightforward, and Gollwitzer speaks plainly:

This is the first thing a German has reason to bear in mind when dealing with the state of Israel, or even with Jews at all: for all intents and purposes, according to the explicit will of the leadership that our people so enthusiastically cheered for years, all these people should no longer live.... It is not to our merit that these people are still alive, apart from a very few. If we did not participate, we nonetheless looked on, or perhaps looked away. We certainly did not throw things in the way of the gruesome murders that happened there in our name because our own survival—yes—was more important than the survival of these people. Too many of us were prepared to approve the related atrocities when Adolf Hitler, so long as he led our people only to victory, required as a prize a few million Jews for the satisfaction of his personal pleasure.... Every German who travels to Israel should be clear: every Jew who still lives today lives not because of us, but in spite of us...in spite of me!”³⁹

Gollwitzer also briefly addresses moral questions pertaining to the establishment of the state of Israel. His opinion is that the legal issues are unresolvable and that “the short-sightedness

³⁷ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 28.

³⁸ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 5.

³⁹ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 16-17.

and selfishness of the Arabs, Jews, and British were equally involved.”⁴⁰ Consequently, it is best to look toward the future.

With reference to the theological moment, Gollwitzer emphasizes that “anyone who deals with Israel must—like it or not—be a theologian.”⁴¹ But his central message to Christians is hermeneutical in nature. “Since one cannot understand the New Testament without the Old Testament, then one cannot understand the whole Bible without talking to the Jews. What Christian arrogance to think that they have nothing to tell us!”⁴² Of course, there are Jews elsewhere than in the state of Israel. Why then is the state of Israel important in this connection? Key is that “interpretation of Scripture does not happen disconnected from life.”⁴³ In the state of Israel, the reunion of this people and this land, Gollwitzer finds the beginnings of a renewed Jewish form of life that he believes will lead to deeper scriptural understanding in both the Jewish and Christian traditions.⁴⁴

I treat Gollwitzer’s first moment, the sociological, last because it is finally the key to understanding the overwhelmingly positive stance that he takes toward the state of Israel.

⁴⁰ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 20.

⁴¹ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 22.

⁴² Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 23.

⁴³ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 24.

⁴⁴ Gollwitzer reflects that usually when this reunion of people and place is noted “in Christian circles” it only stimulates “the apocalyptic imagination,” where one tries to deduce how the end-times will unfold. “This won’t get you very far” (23) in Gollwitzer’s opinion. For further exploration of how Gollwitzer understands the relation between Judaism and Christianity, the best place to begin in English (and perhaps also in German) is the seventh chapter, “Christianity and Judaism,” of Helmut Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, David Cairns, trans. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982); orig. *Befreiung zur Solidarität: Einführung in die Evangelische Theologie*, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1978). Elsewhere Gollwitzer admits that his motivation in rethinking the theological relation between Judaism and Christianity is to remove the anti-Semitic root in Christian thinking so that plant will not flower again in the future. Helmut Gollwitzer, *Forderungen Der Freiheit*, 257.

This is suggested insofar as his discussion of this moment accounts for half of the speech and is littered with vignettes and anecdotes about his time in Israel. At one point he waxes rhapsodic about the beauty and physical power of Israel's youth, for instance. But the connecting thread in this sociological moment is that Israel serves as an "example of a non-restorative social structure."⁴⁵ Gollwitzer interprets Israel on this point in contrast with his own Bonn Republic, and with European society in general. On both sides there was "the grace of the zero point," a chance to remake society. The difference is that "with us, we have gambled it away; there, it has benefited them."⁴⁶ On Gollwitzer's reading, the Bonn Republic has been primarily concerned to reconstruct pre-war society, i.e., to get things back to "normal." Israel, on the other hand, has begun something new. All those who can work are trained to make their contribution to society, and those who are unable to work are cared for both physically and personally. In this way, Gollwitzer believes that Israel has achieved organically the kind of socialist awareness that communist states try but fail to achieve by force.⁴⁷ Indeed, "the phenomenon of kibbutzim"⁴⁸ features prominently in this section of Gollwitzer's speech as a fundamental locus of social solidarity. It is this new form of life in solidarity, uniquely enacted in and symbolized by the kibbutzim, that made such an impression on Gollwitzer during his trip to Israel and motivated his overwhelmingly positive estimation of Israel in this speech.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 6.

⁴⁶ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 11.

⁴⁷ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 12.

⁴⁸ Gollwitzer, *Israel - Und Wir*, 13.

⁴⁹ Pangritz shares this judgment, noting that "one could prove from his doctrine of Israel that Gollwitzer's socialism is a necessary part of his 'system,'" insofar as it was characterized by "the cooperative experiment of the kibbutzim." Andreas Pangritz, "Helmut Gollwitzers Theologie Des Christlich-Jüdischen Verhältnisses, Versuch Eine Kritischen Bilanz," *Evangelische Theologie* 56, no. 4 (1996), 360-61. It seems as though Gollwitzer saw in the kibbutzim of Israel's early decades the beginnings of a new sort of organically democratic and socialist community in contrast to the reactionary element he saw in the Bonn Republic. His early enthusiasm

Gollwitzer's experiences when visiting Israel in 1958 resulted in more activity than the presentation of a single public speech, however. The question of Jewish-Christian relations henceforth became a major preoccupation in his work. This preoccupation took on an institutional dimension when he helped to found a working group in 1961 for discussion between Jews and Christians under the auspices of the German Evangelical *Kirchentag*. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt—one of Gollwitzer's students—was also involved, as was Rabbi Robert Raphael Geis and other Jewish leaders.⁵⁰ This group attracted opposition from more conservative quarters of the church, but it became an important institution in Germany and was replicated there later by the Roman Catholic Church.⁵¹ However, this group experienced “a life-threatening crisis”⁵² in 1963–64, which became known as the “Purim controversy [*Purimstreit*].” In brief, a conservative church group intent on proselytizing Jews was interested in meeting with the working group, and Gollwitzer unilaterally took it upon himself to arrange it. Geis reacted very negatively to this, saying that Christians had a “chance to confess Christ to the Jews—in the Third Reich” by going with the Jews to their death. But having

about the state of Israel is therefore closely bound up with his broader political theology.

⁵⁰ Pangritz provides further names. See Andreas Pangritz, “Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt—A Theological-Biographical Sketch,” *European Judaism* 38:1 (2005), 41, n. 43.

⁵¹ Gollwitzer, *Skizzen Eines Lebens*, 282.

⁵² Pangritz, “Helmut Gollwitzers Theologie Des Christlich-Jüdischen Verhältnisses,” 365. The broad strokes of my narration of this controversy derive from this essay by Pangritz, as well as the following sources: Pangritz, “Helmut Gollwitzer Als Theologe Des Dialogs,” 5–6; Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Hermeneutik Des Christlichen-Jüdischen Verhältnisses: Über Helmut Gollwitzers Arbeit an Der ‘Judenfrage’,” in *Richte Unsere Füße auf den Weg des Friedens: Helmut Gollwitzer zum 70. Geburtstag*, Andreas Baudis, et al., eds. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1979), 144. The correspondence between Gollwitzer and Geis, as well as some of their related correspondence with others, is also available: Robert Raphael Geis, *Leiden an Der Unerlöstheit Der Welt: Briefe, Reden, Aufsätze* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984), 227–75.

missed that opportunity, Geis believes that Christians should be ashamed to attempt such proselytization after the fact.⁵³

Throughout the controversy Gollwitzer maintained that his actions were motivated by friendship and, as far as he was concerned, any friendship worth having had to provide room for disagreement. He appealed to Martin Buber's concept of a "heterogeneous community."⁵⁴ Such a community presupposes that there is controversy and contestation between the members, but this is not allowed to hinder or destroy the community. For this reason, neither side—Jew nor Christian—should be expected to set aside their convictions. Each must remain true to themselves while also finding a way to understand one another in their otherness. Nonetheless, Gollwitzer did come to recognize the insensitivity of his actions. He admitted with reference to Jewish-Christian dialogue that he was being forced to think "previously un-thought thoughts" every day, and he asked Geis to be patient with him as they work through the process of becoming brothers.⁵⁵ For his part, Geis found the patience for which Gollwitzer asked and they were able to continue their friendship and common work.

III.

It is important to consider one later event in the history of Gollwitzer's engagement with Jews and Judaism where that engagement once again felt considerable strain. A conference was held at Beersheeba in 1978 to mark the centenary of Martin Buber's birth. Gollwitzer was invited to speak. His lecture entitled "Martin Buber's Significance for Protestant Theology" was primarily celebratory of Buber's intellectual achievements. In the second and largest section of the lecture, Gollwitzer traces how Buber's work was appropriated in 20th century German Protestant theology. The story begins with the

⁵³ Geis, *Leiden an der Unerlöstheit der Welt*, 253.

⁵⁴ Geis, *Leiden an der Unerlöstheit der Welt*, 255.

⁵⁵ Geis, *Leiden an der Unerlöstheit der Welt*, 273.

Luther renaissance that roughly coincided with Buber's work. Gollwitzer suggests that the two influences coalesced to provide Protestant theology of this period with an impetus to think theological questions through on the basis of a "personal logic" of relationships rather than the abstract and impersonal logic of scholasticism.⁵⁶ He proceeds to trace the presence of such logic in the work of thinkers like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, Karl Heim, and Paul Tillich. This exposition occupies approximately two thirds of the lecture's length.

Nevertheless, Gollwitzer's lecture is as much about Jewish-Christian dialogue as it is about Martin Buber's influence on twentieth century Protestant theology in Germany. Indeed, Gollwitzer begins and ends the lecture on this other theme, which has only a tenuous material connection to the stated theme. Gollwitzer begins his lecture by praising Buber for being one of few Jews to have made, precisely as a Jew, such a decisive imprint on non-Jewish intellectual culture. He even speculates that Buber's otherness as a Jew is what motivated him to understand interpersonal encounter as an exercise in making space for and receiving another's otherness, recognizing that true understanding requires just such an encounter.⁵⁷ Gollwitzer finds this sort of true encounter-in-otherness lacking in Christianity's history: "The history of the church and the Christian mission was anything but the story of a dialogical learning process. It was more the story of Christian imperialism." But Gollwitzer assures his audience that now Jewish-Christian relations are focused on mutually enriching dialogue rather than propaganda and proselytization, and he sees Buber's work as "indispensable" for this undertaking.⁵⁸ These opening reflections bear many similarities to Gollwitzer's comments from the midst of the Purim controversy over a

⁵⁶ Gollwitzer, "Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie," 65.

⁵⁷ Gollwitzer, "Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie," 63.

⁵⁸ Gollwitzer, "Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie," 64.

decade earlier and may be read as something of a commentary on those events.

After what could be understood as a long digression to deal with the stated theme of the lecture, Gollwitzer returns to the theme of Jewish-Christian dialogue by reflecting on some of Martin Buber's comments about that enterprise. In particular, Buber made some statements—especially after World War II—suggesting that Christianity and Judaism can only be understood from the inside. Gollwitzer argues that such thinking stands in “striking contradiction...to his own dialogic” which advocates “the meeting of two subjects precisely in their otherness.”⁵⁹ The mutual otherness involved in this encounter virtually guarantees the presence of mutual criticism and conflict, as was seen in the early years of the *Kirchentag* working group. Consequently, it is no surprise that in the concluding section of his lecture Gollwitzer pivots to address the socio-political situation in the Israeli state at that time.

Gollwitzer attempts to walk a very fine line in this concluding material, and he keeps Buber in view as part of his rhetorical strategy. The socio-political challenge for Israel that Gollwitzer highlights is one that he raised already in his 1958 speech: the need to establish friendly relations between Jews on the one side and Arabs on the other. He appeals to Buber as one who recognized the enduring importance for Israel's well-being of establishing peaceful relations between these two groups. The alternative, that Israel “repeat all the sins of pagan states,” is not in the interest of either Israel in particular or humanity in general. Instead, the proper way to demonstrate Israel's identity as Jewish is “by persistent effort for peaceful—that is, equal—coexistence with the Arabs within Israel and with its Arab neighbors.” This will not be easy, but Gollwitzer believes that “if a people can avoid being a ‘master race [*Her-*

⁵⁹ Gollwitzer, “Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie,” 75.

renvolk]’ and can avoid blundering ‘suddenly’ into a ‘master race’-position, it is the Jews.”⁶⁰

Negative reactions to Gollwitzer’s lecture focused on two complaints, and both are answered by Gollwitzer’s understanding of friendship. First, exception was taken to his use of “master race” language. However, this language was already in use in certain Zionist circles with which Buber had contact,⁶¹ and Buber had employed language of blood and race in his writing with reference to Israel. In a short afterword appended to the lecture for publication, Gollwitzer admits that this language comes from “the dictionary of inhumanity.”⁶² But he stands by the importance of the issue to which he had called attention with this language. Gollwitzer’s basic motivating concern was that Israel had not followed through on the new form of life in solidarity to which he had been so attracted when visiting Israel in 1958. There had been no extension of that solidarity from Jews to Arabs. Indeed, Gollwitzer lamented in 1967 that there had not been kibbutzim founded with the aim of bringing Jews and Arabs together, stating that at that time—nearly twenty years after the founding of the state of Israel—“a real coexistence between the Jewish and Arab Israelis is still in its infancy.”⁶³ The nation that he had thought was on the verge of forging a new way of being in solidarity had stalled and was now in grave danger of surrendering to socio-political business as usual.

Second, Gollwitzer was denounced as a German meddling in Israeli affairs. Gollwitzer anticipated this complaint,

⁶⁰ Gollwitzer, “Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie,” 78.

⁶¹ For more on Buber as not only a Zionist but a socialist Zionist, see Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Martin Buber as a Socialist Zionist,” in *Theological Audacities: Selected Essays*, Andreas Pangritz and Paul S. Chung, eds. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 48–67.

⁶² Gollwitzer, “Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie,” 79.

⁶³ Helmut Gollwitzer, *Vietnam, Israel Und Die Christenheit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 81.

however, and addressed it in his lecture. He freely admits that it must be the Israelis themselves who make the decisions on these challenging issues. But he also notes that even at the geopolitical level other nations give Israel advice implicitly and explicitly through diplomatic statements and policy, thereby thoughtfully participating in the pursuit of peace.⁶⁴ He understands his own remarks as part of that thoughtful participation. As seen with reference to the “Purim controversy,” Gollwitzer’s approach to friendship is solidarity in the midst of otherness precisely by making room for disagreement. Consequently, “he was never able to accept a principle of non-interference, especially vis-à-vis friends.”⁶⁵ Such a practice of friendship is not easy for any of the parties involved, but it was a practice to which Gollwitzer remained committed.

IV.

Helmut Gollwitzer’s work in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue was not only motivated but decisively shaped by a history of personal encounter and friendship with Jews. Already in the experiences of his youth this personal encounter belied prevailing German prejudices and made it possible for Gollwitzer to tread a different path. Although always confessing his own complicity in the horrors of the Third Reich, Gollwitzer nevertheless stands out as one who did more than most in support of his Jewish neighbors. After the war and spurred on by his wife, who was ethnically if not religiously Jewish, Gollwitzer visited Israel and was impressed with the community and solidarity that he found among the Jews there. He brought these impressions back to Germany and harnessed them to build the Jewish-Christian working group in connection with the *Kirchentag*. This was a growing process for Gollwitzer, who had to come to terms in a new way with the personal and theological baggage bequeathed by centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. And when Gollwitzer urged the

⁶⁴ Gollwitzer, “Martin Bubers Bedeutung für die Protestantische Theologie,” 78.

⁶⁵ Pangritz, “Helmut Gollwitzers Theologie Des Christlich-Jüdischen Verhältnisses,” 368.

state of Israel to take more seriously the task of building solidarity in friendship across Jewish-Arab lines, he did so in the spirit of friendship. Gollwitzer remained committed throughout his life to living with Jews in a form of friendship defined by solidarity-in-otherness, where differences are acknowledged, understood, and embraced rather than ignored. He believed that the state of Israel's ultimate success depended on the expansion of this boundary-transgressing friendship. In this way Gollwitzer's challenge to Israel in 1978 was a reiteration of the pronouncement from two decades earlier, uttered at the conclusion of his speech in 1958 commemorating the first decade of Israel's existence—"Shalom, Shalom, Shalom Israel!"