**“A *tembel* hat in the streets of Nazareth: Paul Gauthier’s Israel experience”**

1. Introduction

The lectures that the French priest and theologian Paul Gauthier (La Flèche 1914 - Marseille 2002) gave after his return from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1952 became so popular, that they were recorded and reproduced, together with the coloured slides Gauthier took during the trip, in several towns and villages near Dijon, where Gauthier worked as a theology teacher at the Grand Séminaire. Gauthier’s charism and visual sensibility attracted the attention of a cameraman, who suggested to Gauthier that they travel to the Holy Land and make together a film on the life of Jesus. Gauthier, who at that point (1954) had abandoned his career as a teacher to become a worker-priest in Jacques Loew’s mission of prêtres-ouvriers in Marseille,[[1]](#footnote-1) saw this opportunity as an extension of the working apostolate he chose for himself, since, as he said, “more workers attend cinema than Mass.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

They departed in November 1955 for what Gauthier thought would be a short absence but was actually a long life-changing experience. When the work on the film finished, he decided not to return to France but to become a worker priest in Nazareth, while exploring the new Jewish society of Israel that arouse him much curiosity. So, for the next eleven years, Nazareth and Israel in general would become his home. From looking for traces on the life of Jesus for a film, Gauthier ended up ‘incarnating’ him in his own body. The theology that emerged from his experience in Israel will be spread at the Second Vatican Council under the name ‘the Church of the Poor,’[[3]](#footnote-3) and through it will inspire by the end of the 1960s the Latin American Liberation Theology with its ‘preferential option for the poor’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. The housing cooperative in Nazareth

Gauthier first spent a couple of months in Nazareth in 1956, and after a short return to Paris, he settled in the Galilean city in 1957. Soon after his arrival, he became a recognized figure in the local landscape, provoking the sympathy and respect of both the Arab population of Nazareth and the Jewish authorities. Even the Israeli daily press showed an increasing interest in him. For example, an article from December 1958 reads:

“The priest walks through the main street of the city. Dressed in *khaki* clothes and a ‘*tembel* hat’ [light brown working clothes and a round brimless hat]. He goes to his workplace. […] When the ‘*tembel* hat’ of priest Paul is seen in the main street of Nazareth, dozens of hands would rise to greet him. He is known in Nazareth as an affable man, capable of eliminating any conflict peacefully.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Gauthier’s choice of wearing *khaki* clothes and a ‘*tembel*’ hat, both strong hallmarks of the Jewish pioneers, was a statement that would differentiate him from both, the many Christian clergymen living and working around religious institutions in Nazareth, and the Arab population of the city, most of which would keep a more traditional clothing style.

Nazareth of the 1950s was immersed in a situation of social emergency. The War of Independence (1948) left the Arab population of Israel in a fragile situation. Many of them, especially in the villages run away or were forced to leave their homes and became refugees in Arab neighbor countries or in the Arab big cities within Israel. Nazareth received much of the internal exodus of refugees, provoking the burst of a social crisis. This is how Gauthier described this in *Les Pauvres, Jésus et L´Eglise* (1963), a document he wrote for Vatican II:

“Until 1948, it was a village of 12,000 inhabitants, trading center for the villages of Galilee, with its *souks* (Arab market places), its donkey markets, shoemakers' shops, its carpenters… Suddenly, the Judeo-Arab war provoked an influx of refugees on this small and holy town, where everyone, Christian or Muslim, feels protected by a maternal presence. In eight days, the city doubled its population. People crowded everywhere: in the schools, at Casa Nova Hospice, in the slums, in caves, in stables, in chicken coops, in pigs' sties, not to mention the barracks and hastily built shantytowns. Churches and religious communities generously help these refugees, and distribute donations received mostly from Belgium. But how to provide decent work and housing?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Gauthier was especially disturbed by the notorious gap between the numerous religious institutions and its clergy established in Nazareth, and the conditions of living of the population, in “a city which should shine in all the glory of the Gospel, to be a home of social justice and peace.”[[7]](#footnote-7) From the time of his arrival he dedicated all his efforts to find a solution for the crisis of work and housing he met in that city. In his *Les Mains que voici, Journal de Nazareth* (published in 1964), Gauthier describes the first steps of the enterprise that begun in 1956:

“After three months trying to think of diverse solutions, it seems that a workers cooperative for building houses would provide that solution. With my friend Gurevitch, an advocate, we built the legal structure, and after the agreement of Mgr. Hakim [Archbishop of Galilee], we gathered about forty workers. A committee was elected, composed of workers, me among them. The project has been closely examined and will permit to spread in the spirits the idea of a common social action.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Gauthier soon understood how the political apparatus of the young state worked and identified the different officials who could help him to execute his project. Right after the war of independence and until 1966, a separate military regime was put in place to deal with the Arab population. Two governmental entities were responsible for the Arab population in Israel: the military regime, which was security focused and worked through an arm of the Israeli Defense Force; and the Ministry of Minorities, a governmental office which was humanitarian and politically oriented.[[9]](#footnote-9) Gauthier soon succeeded in opening a personal channel to both offices and “conquered the hearts of both the military regime officials and the representatives of the various government departments in Nazareth,” as was written in an article in the Israeli press on his behalf[[10]](#footnote-10). And indeed, in his *Journal de Nazareth*, Gauthier narrates how, in 1957, the government and the Histadrut (the national union trade) gave their agreement to the creation of the cooperative, and promised their financial and technical support.[[11]](#footnote-11) Due to the intervention of priest Gauthier, it was the first time that the state of Israel would invest money for Arab construction, providing three-fifths of the cost of the houses, and long term loans to the payment of the rest.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Gauthier was well aware of the polarities of the Israeli reality and politics. He expressed it in the entry he wrote on the ‘State of Israel’ for the French Catholic Encyclopedia published in 1966:

“The state of Israel presents particular characteristics, which can be resumed as four antinomies: peaceful and belligerent, Occidental and Oriental, Capitalist and Socialist, democratic and Jewish.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

On the one hand, Gauthier spent most of his time in Israel working among Arabs, whom he identified as “the poor” that were his obsession.[[14]](#footnote-14) Working and living among the marginalized Arab workers in Nazareth, Gauthier witnessed the consequences of the military regime on the Arab population. But on the other hand, when describing his experience in Nazareth both in his writings[[15]](#footnote-15) and in the interviews he gave to the Israeli press, he found important to remark the “goodwill” of the Jewish leadership towards the Arab population, and saw in his cooperative not just a solution for the problem of work and housing but also the bridge that would put an end to the suspicion and hostility between Jews and Arabs in Israel. As he says in a newspaper article from April 1959:

“On Christmas [1957] the cooperative received the map with the land plot marked for the construction of the housing. ‘Indeed, it was a nice Christmas present,’ smiles father Gauthier. ‘However, despite the readiness and willingness of all relevant ministries, especially the military regime, to help us fulfilling the enterprise, many [Arabs] were still reticent and suspicious. […] Indeed, me too, the optimist, did not believe that things would reach such a speed of execution. And here you are today witnessing the magnificent two-family houses on this mountain. This is a nice beginning of a big enterprise, but moreover, this housing will put an end to the distrust, fear and whispering rodents without justification in Israeli Arabs’ - Gauthier promised.” [[16]](#footnote-16)

All along his life in Nazareth, Gauthier saw himself as a mediator between Jews and Arabs in Israel, contributing to bring peace between the two people at the local sphere. I want to suggest that this view, which Gauthier proudly sustained until June 1967 when it was suddenly broke after the Six Day War, fitted the messianic consciousness within which he had lived his Israel experience.

1. An apostolate of poverty

Gauthier settled in Nazareth searching for the traces of the life of Jesus. Spiritually nourished by the religious experience of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), the French Catholic priest who traveled to Nazareth and the Middle East to imitate Jesus’ life of poverty and work,[[17]](#footnote-17) Gauthier had placed these two principles as the pillar of his theology.

First of all, he made the decision of living in poverty, and demanded poverty from all religious people, directing a special critique to the influential hierarchy of Nazareth, many of them owners of large properties, who are “tragically unwilling to apply pontifical directives on fair salaries.”[[18]](#footnote-18) For Gauthier, poverty should be a precondition for any missionary work:

“Christ has pronounced this prophecy: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matt. 11, 28). But before speaking, here, in Nazareth, Jesus wanted to live and suffer with the little people, working at the mercy of difficult bosses, in order to save humanity from sin and give it hope. How to hear this Psalm and transmit the invitation of Christ to the damned of the earth or those crushed by the sin of the world? Should we not take the humblest place in the harsh human condition?”[[19]](#footnote-19)

In Nazareth Gauthier strictly adopted on himself the principle of poverty as a lifestyle. He asked that his salary be only food, but when the cooperative fellows insisted, he accepted to be paid the minimum.[[20]](#footnote-20) He transferred the apartment that was offered to him at the cooperative to a numerous family who was living in an ancient cave in the Schneller Quarter in Nazareth (a piece of land of German Christians ownership) and established in an extremely humble hut. A description of Gauthier’s hut is provided by a journalist who visited him in 1966:

“The hut, made of bins and tree branches, is almost empty of furniture. It has only two beds and a bookcase full of philosophy books in different languages. Here lives Paul Gauthier. […] ‘Jesus Christ too lived in a miserable hut’, he says.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

In an earlier article from 1958 another journalist even wrote that the hut had no electricity and running water.[[22]](#footnote-22) The cave was transformed by him into a prayer and reunion place for his small group of disciples, a few European and Latin American young Catholics who joined *Les compagnons de Jesus Charpentier*, Gauthier’s religious enterprise in Nazareth. In May 1967, only a few weeks before the war, an article on Gauthier and his group appear in the central daily newspaper *Maariv*:

“Father Gauthier does not normally wear a cloak. He does so only when leading the prayers, every day at 6, only for the disciples living with him. They walk to an ancient cave, twenty meters away from the hut in which they live. [The cave] is lit by two small oil lamps, has a wooden table and two or three ritual articles. By the time he was a manual worker, he built with his hands the door of wooden panels taken from the housing construction. This is how he sees himself even today, though now, he says in a tone of apology, he spends most of his time writing books.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

1. An apostolate of manual labor

Indeed, despite his relatively advanced age by the time of his arrival (42), his lack of training, which provoked him much physical pain while working, and the “oppressive” hot weather of Israel,[[24]](#footnote-24) Gauthier spent most of his years in Israel as a worker. Manual work was for him the most profound religious experience, what allowed him to feel he is incarnating Jesus in his own body. His *Journal de Nazareth* is full of descriptions of the spiritual experience of labor, for example this:

“While I prepare the concrete, I see four companions who carry heavy stones. They are 150 meters lower and must climb three terraces of five to ten meters each. The concrete is finished, I must join the stone bearers. I go down to the team. Here is the pile of big stones. Each weighs within 50kgs. Can I just lift them? A comrade solves this problem: He places one on my shoulder. I may had placed it wrong, because I get tired fast. Arriving to half way, I must gather all my strength. I think of those carriers of Jerusalem burdened with three times heavier loads and of the One who carried, with the Cross, the sin of the world. Are not the comrades ahead of me, carrying heavier stones than mine, a living testimony of Jesus’ burden of the sin of the world? This meditation allows me to get to the top. Undoubtedly, this is the best way of the Cross I was given the opportunity to experience. Is it me who carries the stones with Jesus or Jesus who carries them with me?”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Through this experience of hard manual work Gauthier felt to be closing two thousand years standing between him and the father of Christianity. That was, according to his own testimony, the answer he used to give to his fellow workers who would not understand why someone who, like him, had other options in life would choose this kind of hard work.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Gauthier saw collective work as an act of religious love. For him, the spiritual meaning of collective work leans in the fact that the individual effort is a potential relief for other fellow workers. By taking the heaviest stone, he says, one reduces the suffering of his comrades. Thus, for humanity, to take upon oneself hard work is an act of brotherly love.[[27]](#footnote-27) For working people, as for Jesus before, “work is a redemptory sacrifice”.[[28]](#footnote-28) That is why, Gauthier says in an attempt to promote a working apostolate among Catholic clergy, the task of the priest is to offer this sacrifice to others as God’s gift.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Besides the physical effort that converts work into a religious sacrifice, Gauthier also remarked the potentiality of the meditative dimension of manual work. Monotonous and intellectually unchallenging, it leaves man’s mind free for meditation and prayer. In his own words:

“The work of digging is considered to be the last of the trades that the last of the imbeciles can accomplish if he has strong enough muscles. That leaves the mind free during work. But very quickly, the mind is taken, buried in your arms, your back, in your hands, in this earth you dig, you raise.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

It was in these long hours of digging that Gauthier claimed to have reached the highest religious and social insights, which would shape the theology he would write in his years in Israel and spread at Vatican II. For example, he narrates the occasion in which while digging a trench, appeared in his lips Psalm 130, *De Profundis*, and revealed itself to him in a new light. Although the trench would seem to him like a tomb, he suddenly understood that the abyss from which the author of the Psalm is calling God at the beginning of the Psalm is not the call of death, as it is traditionally interpreted. “No: the abyss from the bottom of which I cried out to You, Lord, is this depth of the misery of my digger brothers, the last of the maneuvers, the damn of the earth. *De Profundis* had never taken on such a meaning.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Consequently, the last verse of the Psalm, which translation is: “And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities,” is translated by Gauthier as “He will liberate humanity from its injustices.”[[32]](#footnote-32) In Gauthier’s contemporary scenario in which Israel is not any more the oppressed and the weak, humanity takes the place of the Biblical Israel, and social injustices that of personal sins.

From a traditional metaphysical reading associating the Psalm with the dead, the hard-working experience transformed for Gauthier the Psalm into a religious manifest raising the voice of the oppressed, ignorant, frustrated and exhausted workers. This experience of giving an active testimony of the suffering of the lowest layer humanity is what allows man to achieve redemption. At this point this is not necessarily a political statement but the religious aspiration of imitating Jesus in his carrying of the Cross with the human suffering. As we will see at the final section of this paper, Gauthier’s identification with the poor will become a political statement only with his religious radical transformation after the 1967’s Six Days War.

1. The Kibbutz – a sublime wisdom that needs to be learned

As mentioned before, in his years in Israel Gauthier established close relations with Jews, relations that went much further than the issues related to his cooperative of work. He worked and studied Hebrew in Kibbutzim (collective agrarian settlements) and showed interest in their lifestyle. He founded in the Kibbutz a social amendment to the unjust economic and social system dominant in the modern world, which creates those marginalized and oppressed people he claims to be raising his voice for. As he wrote in his Journal of Nazareth,

“Certainly, from what I already know, the kibbutzim represent, in contemporary humanity, an extraordinary realization. This form of life and work breaks with the ordinary manners: communal life, suppression of salary and money, communitarian work! All this seems utopic, impossible. In fact, there are nearly three hundred exemplars of it in Israel, in which around a hundred thousand men and women live. […] There were the Kibbutzim who allowed the creation of Israel, they fashioned this type of man, remarkable for his patience, his action and altruism, like Ben Gurion, and continue to maintain the pioneer spirit in the country.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Gauthier’s admiration for the Kibbutz can be noted even in his interventions at Vatican II -in the documents he wrote for and during the Council and in lectures he gave.[[34]](#footnote-34) In times of a strong anti-communist Catholic propaganda, Gauthier felt attracted precisely by the socialist elements of the socio-economic structure of the Kibbutzim he visited. “In the Kibbutzim”, he wrote to the Fathers of the Council, “there is no exploitation of man by man but a certain wisdom, a more human way of life.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Moreover, Gauthier identified in this new Jewish structure, a fulfilment of the ‘Christian’ values presented in the New Testament and put into practice by the early Christian communities of Palestine of the first century:

“[In the kibbutzim] the Jews had abolished the system of wages, generalizing the way of the monks in their monasteries, and understanding work like the first community of Jerusalem did: they share their goods and their work, as said in Acts 4, 32, 35: ‘*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had… there were no needy persons among them.’”*[[36]](#footnote-36)

After his experiences working and living in Kibbutzim, Gauthier arrived at the conclusion that Christians should learn from those Jews how to fulfil the Christian beatitudes regarding social issues.[[37]](#footnote-37) His intention was that Catholic priest learn from this Jewish new way of life, the content of a new apostolate oriented to the vast majority of society who, strongly atheist, would no longer accept clericalism and paternalism.[[38]](#footnote-38) He thought that this experience would give tools to worker-priests serving in working-class neighbourhoods such as the Paris suburbs.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Hence, he had made an agreement with Kibbutz Ginosar, at the northern shore of the Lake of Galilee, and begun to bring groups of Christian volunteers, members of the fraternity he founded*,* for a period of six months, to work in the different manufacturing and agricultural branches side by side with the Kibbutz members “in great friendship,”[[40]](#footnote-40) while studying Hebrew in the Kibbutz’ *ulpan* [Israeli system for adult Hebrew learning]. The success of this partnership arrived even at the ears of the Pope John XXIII who in 1960 delivered a special greeting to the Kibbutz for their hospitality towards the many Christian pilgrims who spent a period there, as was published in the Israeli press:

“The Pope John XXIII has delivered today a personal greeting to Kibbutz Ginosar, through a special emissary, the priest Pierre (*sic*) Gaultier of Nazareth. In it, the Pope wishes to thank the administration of the Kibbutz for the wonderful hospitality they offered to a group of pilgrims of a special Christian fraternity whose members advocate fulfilling the ideals of Christianity through manual labor. Dozens of pilgrims belonging to this fraternity have recently been hosted in Ginosar. These pilgrims continue to be in close contact with Kibbutz Ginosar”.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Staying in kibbutzim allowed Gauthier to connect also with another central aspect of the Israeli experience. While Nazareth allowed him to feel the closest to Jesus, the Kibbutzim opened for him the connection to Biblical nature and landscapes. The kibbutzim he visited in Jezreel Valley, the Lake of Galilee, the Negev desert, they all became for Gauthier living proofs that “the Holy Land is not a relic. It is a reality.”[[42]](#footnote-42) But a reality that reverberates Biblical references, not only in his mind, but also for his fellow Jewish workers. This is reflected, among other places, in a paragraph of his Journal in which Gauthier narrates his work as a shepherd in Kibbutz Mishmar HaNegev:

“In the afternoon, at three o’clock, I got with Moumousse [the responsible for the sheepfold, a former teacher in France] to lead the sheep to the desert. In a thick cloud of dust raised by the one thousand two hundred legs, we move away from the Kibbutz. The sheep glean seeds or bits of straw along the way. After an hour or two of walking we stop and Moumousse explains to me about the topography and the archeology of this land formerly frequented by Abraham and Jacob. He takes from his bag a Hebrew Bible from which he comments on the passages referring to that area and to sheepfold.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Of course, sheepfold and shepherds are central motifs in Christian tradition, seasoning Gauthier’s experience with a clear Messianic baggage:

“I quote to him the passages from the Gospel on the Good Shepherd, the sheep without shepherd… he knows those texts but interprets them in a naturalistic sense. We part a piece of bread. A sheep called Kouki approaches familiarly to share our snack.”

As the shepherd helps the lost sheep to rejoin its fold, we too, reflects Gauthier, need to be prepared to receive the lost sheepfold of Israel with love when it will find its way home.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In the Kibbutzim, Gauthier was exposed to a new approach of Bible reading, different from what he knew from his religious background. Gauthier noticed that those *kibbutzniks*, as most of the modern Jews, read the Bible as a historical “profane” book.[[45]](#footnote-45) And indeed, the Bible played a central role in the Zionist ethos. This book was for the founding fathers of the Zionist movement not only an instrument for cultivating the internal unity of the Jewish people and motivating them to engage with Zionism, but also a weapon in the struggle for the land.[[46]](#footnote-46) The historical dimension of the Bible, emphasized in the modern Israel, is what gave the Jewish people, in their own eyes, the right on the land, and the justification for the Jewish return to it. As we will see, this point marks a clear difference between the Zionist and Gauthier’s approach to the Bible and the Land: the first being particularistic-nationalistic, the second, universalistic.

1. Gordon and the redemption of work

It is not casualty that the principles we presented here -the centrality of manual work and an unmediated connection with the soil and the Biblical landscapes- were the two elements that nurtured Gauthier’s religious experience in the years he spent in Israel. These were also the pillars on which was built the Jewish nationalist ethos that emerged by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and which shaped the character of the nascent state of Israel Gauthier met on his arrival. In Zionism, these pillars were best formulated and developed by the philosopher and pioneer Aaron David Gordon, ‘the theoretician’ of the Jewish organic nationalism.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Aaron David Gordon (Podolia, today in Ukraine, 1856 – Degania, Israel, 1922) grew up in a traditional Jewish family but was attracted to secular studies and Zionist ideas. In 1904, at the age of 48, he emigrated to Israel and as a worker, a philosopher and a writer became the symbol of the Jewish settlement of the beginning of the 20th century.

Gordon called for the sanctification of labor through the renewal of manual Jewish work, not only as a Zionist national project but most importantly as an individual way of redemption.[[48]](#footnote-48) For Gordon, physical work in agriculture was a means for a desired return of man to nature, and what would enable the individual man and the nation to reconnect with its deepest source of life.[[49]](#footnote-49) He succeeded in finding in physical work the romanticism that so many young men and women who had left their lives in the diaspora in Europe to build a new world in the Land of Israel, but were clashed by the extremely hard conditions prevailing in the land at the turn of the century, could not. In the face of despair, Gordon found hope in manual work that connects the Jewish person with the land, while emphatically negating the diaspora, which was, according to him, the responsible for the situation of atrophy of the Jewish existence of his time. In a letter from 1909, published in a compilation named *‘Letters of a Worker from Palestine,’* mentioned by Gauthier in his Journal of Nazareth, Gordon writes:

“Hear me, my brother, and hear my sister, my dream, and remember that you, too, have dreamed like me. In my dream -I come to the land. […] Remember, though, that beneath the ruins [of the diasporic existence] there is a hot whispering coal, hiding from the spirit of that life, and the spirit of the land blows to revive it. […] And I shake off strongly, with all my might, shake off myself that life. And I start everything from the beginning, everything from the beginning. From the alphabet I start life, I do not change, I do not mend, but I make everything from new. And the first thing that opens my heart to life, which I did not know like, is work. Not work for a living or work for a *mitzvah*. Work for life-work, work which a new light shines on, a light which I saw, which is one of the deepest roots of life. And I work ... […]

“Hence, wherever I continue to work, to toil, to suffer – no drop of blood, nothing in my strength, in my mind, is lost for free, because every drop of blood is a spark of fire, and every bit of strength and mind – a spark of resurrection for my soul.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

As previously seen in Gauthier, we have here a description of manual work as a religious experience, capable of providing redemption to the land, the people and the individual man. However, contrarily to the Christian’s view, for Gordon this work has a prominent nationalistic element. Work leads to redemption only when it is performed by the Jewish people in the land to which his soul is attached to. Not only work but also, and maybe primarily, the ancient Jewish history that connects the people to the land is what gives the Jews rights on it.[[51]](#footnote-51) Gordon’s thought had a clear political content, contents that was missed or dismissed by Gauthier.

Another element of Gordon that attracted Gauthier is the religious, mystic tone he utilized in his writings, which in his eyes was contrasted to the secular-Marxist atmosphere he found in most of the Kibbutzim he visited, and which disturbed him so much.[[52]](#footnote-52)

It is not surprising then, that Paul Gauthier was deeply moved by the ideas of this Jewish thinker, to whom he became aware of when, during a visit to Kibbutz Degania, the first Kibbutz in Israel, established in 1909 on the southern corner of the Lake of Galilee (a region which, in Gauthier’s words, “was then only swamps and malaria, and forty years later is an earthly paradise”[[53]](#footnote-53)), he was led to the Gordon Museum.

Like Gordon, Paul Gauthier had also moved to Israel at a relatively advanced age to experience physical labor among poor worker companions. As mentioned before, he also has descriptions of the physical of work as a source of religious joy and personal redemption:

“Today, the work has been particularly hard. It was necessary to carry stones, to handle the shovel and the pick, to serve the concrete. The heat was overwhelming. I find myself, tonight, broken, all the painful muscles ... and yet a great joy has sustained me all day.”[[54]](#footnote-54)

Gauthier found in Gordon’s philosophy a suitable articulation of his own romantic ideas about labor. However, there is a significant difference between the two, a difference that may perhaps tell something broader on the essence of religious duty in Judaism and Christianity. For Gordon, it is labor itself which provides man with the opportunity of living a life in the image of God, a life in the sense of "being partners with God in Creation”.[[55]](#footnote-55) Gauthier agrees with Gordon that work means partnership with God in creation, and redemption for the land and man. The accelerated development of the state of Israel, achieved by individual and organized work, is the best example of it.

However, Gauthier will say that, while containing a part of truth, Gordon’s words “are inexact from a theological point of view”.[[56]](#footnote-56) This is because, while Gordon emphatically attached material and spiritual dimensions of work as being one and inseparable,[[57]](#footnote-57) Gauthier insisted in presenting them as two different spheres of redemption: temporal and eternal, heavenly and earthly. According to Gauthier, Zionism, and Gordon’s thought within it, had remained in the first dimension of redemption:

“These two orders are different and there is an atheist Marxist significance of work which is no more than a caricature of the true redemption. However, there is also a Christian sense of work which through Christ becomes redemptive. If the two orders are different, they are not separated. In the earthy, temporal and material sphere, through work can man come out of misery. There is in work an accomplishment of man. Work not only allows man to gain his bread, but it permits him to become more human and to participate in human solidarity helping to build the earthly city. For the Jews this is strongly clear.

In the spiritual, eternal, celestial sphere, work allows man to collaborate with the Creator who had commanded ‘conquer and possess the earth’, to complete creation. Work permits man to redeem his pain by the labor’s offer of fatigue and sorrow. Work permits man to communicate with the Carpenter of Nazareth and through him with all the brothers and the Father who ‘works endlessly’, and with the Creative Spirit. That is wonderful.[[58]](#footnote-58)

A spiritual, heavenly dimension of work and redemption is denied in Gauthier’s worldview for all those who reject the mediation of Jesus, and his sacrifice for humanity. The ‘labor’s offer of fatigue and sorrow’, brings us back to the concept of sacrifice, which Gauthier, following the Christian tradition, placed at the center of his theology of work. It is worthy to say that Gordon was totally against the idea of sacrifice, as can be learnt especially from his personal letters.[[59]](#footnote-59)

1. The Six Days War and Gauthier’s political turn

For twelve years lived Paul Gauthier his religious experience in Israel. During that period, although he was in a daily contact with the Israeli authorities fostering his cooperative of work in Nazareth, he avoided making critical statements on the national and international spheres of the Israeli politics. On the contrary, in the entry on the State of Israel he wrote in 1966 for the Catholic Encyclopedia, he affirmed that “it is exact that the State of Israel is peaceful,” as expressed in its Independence bill,[[60]](#footnote-60) and that it is clear that the state is driven by prophetic principles.[[61]](#footnote-61) However, a year after writing these words, Gauthier will be suddenly confronted with a new reality that will undermine this worldview.

Paul Gauthier and his partner, Sister Marie-Therese Lazcare, spent the war mostly in the Jordanian side of Jerusalem, trying to assist the civil population affected by the events. The French Catholic journal *Cahier du Temoignage Chretien* dedicated the volume of July 1967 to publish the diary of Sister Marie-Therese in which she narrates her experience of the war in Jerusalem. References to the hubris and bullying of the Israeli soldiers towards civil Arab population, including force expulsions and looting and razing houses, can be found all around the diary, although not without emphasizing that there were also some human attitudes among the Israeli soldiers.[[62]](#footnote-62) In that short volume there is also an article of Paul Gauthier called “Jérusalem, capital de l’Humanité” about the war. This paragraph reflects the spirit of the article:

“When the first Israeli troops entered Jerusalem, it seemed that everything was possible, everything, that is, peace. These troops were dignified, simple, as human as an army can be. Some Jewish and Arab soldiers fraternized. But two days later, everything changed: plunder and brutality were not yet the worst, since that is the lot of any war. The worst thing was this: expulsion and destruction that created so many refugees. We lost the peace. It was a huge and bitter disappointment for those who, refusing to be on the side of the Jews, love the one and the other as brothers.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

From this paragraph we learn that Gauthier’s position on the war was not unequivocally negative, and that he did not automatically joined the world’s Catholic hostile responses, including pope Paul VI’s condemnation of the Israeli use of force, the demand for an immediate solution for the Arab refugees and for the creation of an international regime to take control of Jerusalem.[[64]](#footnote-64) Even after the beginning of the war, and even in the sight of the Israeli soldiers entering Jerusalem, Gauthier still believed in the Israeli pioneer spirit he so much admired.

However, far from denying the rights of the Jews to have a State in the Land of Israel, and admitting that the Jewish state emerged from a huge injustice: the flow of Jewish refugees from the blooding Europe in World War II, Gauthier’s claim is that, “the war is useless if it does not lead to a better justice than the injustice against which one have struggled.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

After witnessing some of the abuses of the winning side toward the Arab most vulnerable population, Gauthier felt he could no longer serve as the “neutral” mediator who, out of the messianic consciousness he lived in the twelve years he spent in Israel, dreamed of being. As said before, for him, the cooperative of work was a bridge of peace and mutual acceptance between Jews and Arabs in Israel. But after the violent events that succeeded the war, this bridge could be no longer sustained.

The way the close relationship between Gauthier and Kibbutz Ginosar, the kibbutz with which Gauthier held the closest relation finished, might shed light on Gauthier’s turn regarding the state of Israel. In an interview I held with Atallah Mansour, a Christian Arab journalist who was very close to Gauthier in his years in Nazareth, he told me the story of Gauthier’s departure from Israel, a story which is not narrated in any of Gauthier’s writing. According to this testimony, a few days after the end of the Six Days War, Gauthier published an article in the North American Press (since it was rejected by the Israeli censorship) denouncing the abuses he witnessed by the victorious Israeli soldiers on the Arab civil population in the villages. The members of Kibbutz Ginosar felt deeply betrayed. They hanged the article in the Kibbutz’ billboard, marked with a big marker sign reading: ““our friend.”” Gauthier felt no longer welcome there. A few days later he would leave the country with no personal belongings, never to return.[[66]](#footnote-66) He crossed to Jordan and spent the next years working among the poor population and the refugees there. From the Jordanian side he started to see Israel in a completely different light.

The most latent example of what I see as a religious as well as political radical transformation, is a lecture he gave firstly at the ‘First World Conference of Christians for Palestine,’ in Beirut in May 1970, and after that he likely reproduced in Europe (a copy of this lecture was sent from Belgium to Kibbutz Ginosar by a member of the Histadrut in October 1970). Far from the expressions of friendship and admiration Gauthier wrote in the books he published before 1967 -some of which we brought in this paper- this lecture shows a completely hostile approach to the state of Israel, its authorities and even the kibbutzim. For example, in the *Journal* Gauthier recalls a friendly visit of representatives of the Israeli government and the Histadrut, who came to Nazareth to ask for Gauthier’s advice on how to improve the living conditions of the Arab citizens, and listened “with a surprising attention and good will” to his answer, even when Gauthier gently questioned the priority of the state of Israel on saving Jews before any other person.[[67]](#footnote-67) In the lecture given thirteen years after the event, Gauthier would tell to his audience a different version of the answer he gave to the Israeli authorities:

“You act exactly like Hitler, apply the same method, except that you have changed the algebraic sign. Where Hitler put the sing minus, willing to destroy all the Jews, you, you put the sign plus, willing to save all the Jews. But it is all the same racism involved: all the Jews and nothing but the Jews.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Later in the lecture Gauthier will even hint to a resemblance between the Israeli troops and the Nazi soldiers.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The Histadrut was treated in a similar tone. In 1966, only a year before the war, in his attempts to explain to the Catholic world what the state of Israel is in the abovementioned entry for the Catholic encyclopaedia, Gauthier wrote:

“The government and the workers union (*Histadrut*) make great efforts to build friendships with all peoples, especially young nations, and willingly and generously lend them technical and social assistance.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

However, four years later, in front of an anti-Israeli audience, the Histadrut will be presented as an imperialistic entity “which became a Zionist instrument of the Jewish workers to conquer work and eliminate Arab workforce,”[[71]](#footnote-71) and which utilizes the new Arab neighbours only as a propaganda to please the world’s opinion.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Finally, even the kibbutzim, which as we have seen, have awakened in Gauthier so much admiration, did not remain immune to Gauthier’s attack. This is how Gauthier recalls the invitation that Kibbutz Ginosar extended to him and his companions to come and spend a period in the Kibbutz:

“We were happy to live in a Kibbutz. This communitarian way of life appeared to us like the ideal both of the Gospel and of Socialism: everyone works according to his possibilities and receives according to his necessities. There are no poor since everything is common. **We needed time to discover that the realization of this ideal leans on injustice and is linked to Capitalism**.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

Gauthier continues explaining that when the land in which the kibbutz stands was purchased by Jewish wealth from Arab landowners from Egypt and Lebanon, there where Palestinian peasants cultivating it who now remained without living means. This situation provoked rivalry between the Jewish settlers and the villagers, until one night the members of the kibbutz decided to attack and destroy the Arab village, expelled the habitants and bombed the houses.

“That is why, he says, working in the kibbutz’ fields, we found the ruins of a village. The establishment of the kibbutz was accompanied with the ruin of a Palestinian village first dispossessed from its lands by the Zionist money, and then shaved by the Israeli force.”[[74]](#footnote-74)

This was the fate, Gauthier says, of more than a million Palestinians terrorized by the Israeli forces and forced to flee as refuges.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The identification of Zionism with Capitalism and imperialism, absent from Gauthier’s writings before 1967 (except for a brief mention of the Jewish lifestyle at the city of Tel Aviv[[76]](#footnote-76)), will convert the whole geopolitical conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, into a class war: the poor and oppressed against the imperialist rich. This is what, according to him, happened in the Six Days War:

“In this context, the Six Days War in 1967 appeared to us as a battle of this world-war of the exploited peoples against the rich nations, here of the Arab people against Israel and the USA.”[[77]](#footnote-77)

This new unidimensional classist approach of Gauthier towards the state of Israel will be later adopted by left-wing Catholics in their anti-Israeli position, being present in Latin America’s liberation theology in the 1970s and 1980s, and even until more recently.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Gauthier arrived at Israel driven by a religious fervor of ‘Imitation Christi.’ As such, while identifying with the Arab poor workers, he was also religiously moved by the Jewish new society. As Attalah Mansour told me with a sarcastic smile: “he was an enthusiastic Zionist ‘Jew’, only liberal.”[[79]](#footnote-79) The ‘Gordonian’ flavour he absorbed in the kibbutzim and in the young state, led him to affirm that “Christians have the right to see in the return of the state of Israel the historical facts that could become ‘the premises of Redemption.’”[[80]](#footnote-80)

However, after the Six Days War, deeply disappointed with his incapability of fulfilling the Messianic role he had set for himself of serving as a bridge of recognition and understanding between Jews and Arabs, he experienced a radical religious transformation, which led him to put aside his universalistic transcendental approach and attach to an earthly political position of clear ‘good’ and ‘evil’ actors.

Still today, more than fifty years after these events, the elder members of Kibbutz Ginosar who knew Gauthier personally, refuse to talk about him. It seems that after the ’67 war, both sides were eager to forget this Israeli chapter in the Catholic history of the second half of the twentieth century.

1. On the activities of priest Loew and the Mission de Marseille see, Émile Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers,* (Paris : Casterman, 1965), pp. 415-443. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Desmond O’gready, *Eat from God’s Hands, Paul Gauthier and the Church of the Poor*, (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the action of the group of the ‘Church of the Poor’ at Vatican II see: Paul Gauthier*, « Consolez mon peuple », Le Concile et L’Eglise des Pauvres*, (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1965), pp. 277-281; [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. José Legorreta, ‘Identidad y Cambio en la Iglesia Latinoamericana,’ in: *El Pacto de las Catacumbas, la misión de los pobres en la Iglesia*, Xabier Pikaza and Jose Antunes da Silva (eds.), (Navarra, 2015), pp. 253-274. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shraga Har-Gil, ‘Aba Paul miNatzeret’ (Father Paul from Nazareth), *Davar*, December 26, 1958. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Paul Gauthier, *Les Pauvres, Jésus et L´Eglise*, (Paris : Editions Universitaires, 1963), pp. 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici, Journal de Nazareth*, (Paris: Edition Universitaires, 1964), p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Uzi Benziman and Atallah Masour, *Daiarei Mishne (Subtenants)*, (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Sitton, ‘Plitim arabim beIsrael ovrim leshikunei keva,’ (Arab refuges in Israel move to permanent housing), *Haboker*, April 29, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Desmond O’gready, *Eat from God’s Hands,* p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paul Gauthier, [*Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain : encyclopedie* , G. Jacquemet](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791) (ed.), vol 6, (Paris 1966), p. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See among others Dussel, “En Búsqueda del Sentido (Origen y desarrollo de una Filosofía de la Liberación),” *Anthropos* 180 (1998), p. 17; Severgrade, *Israël vu pars les catholiques francais (1945-1994)*, (Paris: Karthala, 2014), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See for example, Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 131; Desmond O’gready, *Eat from God’s Hands,* p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. David Sitton, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Charles de Foucauld, *Oeuvres Spirituelles: Anthologie* (Paris, 1958), p. 664. Quoted by Gisbert Greshake, ‘The Spiritual Charism of Nazareth,’ *Communion* 31, (Spring 2004), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Joel Dar, ‘Komer bone shikunim laplitim’ (A priest builds housing for the refugees), *Davar*, July 5, 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Shraga Har-Gil, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tuvia Carmel, ‘Ha’av Gauthier mearguen ezra lenitzrachei haolam -mimeono benatzeret,’ (Father Gauthier organises help for the world needed -from his home in Nazareth), *Ma’ariv*, May 22, 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, pp. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., pp. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. p. 50, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Paul Gauthier, “L’athéisme de masse”, recorded lecture at the Second Vatican Council, 28.9.1965, Second Vatican Council Archive, Maurits Sabbe Library, KU Leuven. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Gauthier, *Jésus, l’Église et les pauvres,* p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid.*,* *Les Mains que voici*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Paul Gauthier*, « Consolez mon peuple », Le Concile et L’Eglise des Pauvres*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Paul Gauthier, *Les Pauvres, Jésus et L´Eglise,* p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. ‘Bracha ishit meha’apifior nimsera lekibutz Ginosar’, (A personal greeting from the Pope was delivered to Kibbutz Ginosar), *Davar*, June 29, 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* pp. 83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Zeev Sternhell, *Binian uma o Tikun Chevra?* *Leumiut be sozialism betnuat haavoda aisraelit*, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1995), p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Zeev Sternhell, ibid., pp. 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Aaron David Gordon, ‘hachalom upitrono’, (1909), *HaUma VehaAvoda*, (Tel Aviv: Hasifria Hatzionit, 1955), p. 82 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., p. 86 and *passim*. For an analysis of Gordon’s approach to nature, and its connection to the national renaissance, see: Yehoyada Amir, ‘Prophecy and Halakha, Towards non-Orthodox Religious Praxis in (Eretz) Israel, The Tikva Center at New York University School of Law, (2012), pp. 28-38; Eilon Shamir, *For the Sake of Life, The Art of Living According to Aharon David Gordon* (in Hebrew), (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2018); Einat Ramon, *A New Life, Religion, Motherhood and Supreme Love in the Works of Aharon David Gordon*, (in Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Gordon, ‘hachalom upitrono,’ p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Gordon, ‘Avodatenu meata’ (1918), *HaUma VehaAvoda*, p. 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* pp. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., pp. 77-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Aaron David Gordon, ‘Ir’urim ve hegionot’, *Kitvei A. D. Gordon*, vol. 5, (Tel Aviv: Hapoel Hatzair, 1929), p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Gordon, ‘Ha’avoda’ (1911), *HaUma VehaAvoda*, pp. 94-95. On the resemblance between Gordon’s idea of work and the Hassidic concept of ‘Avoda bagashmiut,’ see Abraham Shapira, ‘Or Hachaim beiom ktanot,’ (Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1996), pp. 240-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Gauthier, *Les Pauvres, Jésus et l’Eglise*, pp. 34-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Muki Tzur (ed.) *At einech bodeda bamarom: michtabim meA. D. Gordon veelav*, (Tel Aviv : Hakibbutz Hameuchad, p. 1998), p. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Paul Gauthier, [*Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain*,](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791) p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., pp. 209-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. ‘Jerusalem et le Sang des pauvres, 5-8 Juin 1967’, *Cahier du temoignane chretien*, n. 47, (Paris 1967), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Livia Rokach, *The Catholic Church and the Question of Palestine*, (London: Saqi Books, 1987), pp. 71-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Gauthier, ‘Jérusalem, capital de l’Humanité,’ ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Atallah Mansour, oral interview, Nazareth, May 1, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Paul Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Paul Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne devant le problème palestinien*, Intervention a la première conférence mondiale des chrétiens pour la Palestine du Père Paul Gauthier ou Beyrouth, le 9 mai 1970, (Genève : Groupe d’Etude sur le Moyen-Orient, 1970), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Paul Gauthier, [*Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain : encyclopedie* , pp.](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791) 208-209. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne devant le problème palestinien*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid. p. 7. My remark. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Gauthier, *Les Mains que voici,* p. 79*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne devant le problème palestinien*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See among many others: Enrique Dussel, ‘Lo Político en Levinas, Hacia una filosofía política crítica’, *Signos filosóficos*, núm. 9, (México, enero-julio, 2003), pp. 130-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Atallah Mansour, oral interview, Nazareth, May 1 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Paul Gauthier, [*Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain*, p.](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791) 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)