

Israeli institute gets \$2.2 million to help Christians study Jewish thought

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(RNS) A new institute in Jerusalem has been awarded \$2.2 million to help Christians and Jews study Jewish texts, launching what's being billed as a new kind of Jewish-Christian cooperation.

The Herzl Institute was awarded what's being called the first ever multimillion-dollar grant in Jewish theology by the U.S.-based Templeton Foundation, a philanthropic organization that has focused much of its giving on science-related projects. The Herzl Institute is a research institute that focuses on the development of Jewish ideas in fields like philosophy and history.

The institute is named for Theodor Herzl, considered the father of modern political Zionism.

Jewish and Christian collaboration has often been relegated to the political level, said Herzl President Yoram Hazony. The partnership reflects a new kind of engagement between Christians and Jews, he said.

"We're not just talking about Christians wanting to help Jews out of solidarity or charity," Hazony said. "We are talking about the dominant faith of Western civilization saying: 'The Jews have something to give us, something that we need.' This is not something that appears in the old playbook for Jewish-Christian dialogue."

The King's College in Manhattan and the Herzl Institute also announced a partnership to send Christian students to a Hebraic Heritage course where they will study and learn from Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem for a summer. Hazony said professors at Assumption College in Massachusetts and Wesleyan College in Connecticut will also recruit students to study in Jerusalem.

"What we're seeing right now is not the old kind of interfaith dialogue where Christians talked about their Messiah and Jews talked about their Messiah and everybody agrees to disagree," Hazony said. "This is completely new dialogue, where we look at Old Testament text and rabbinic texts and Christians are willing to look at Judaism and the Jewish text through Jewish eyes with Jewish lecturers."

Courses will include studying Hebraic tradition, the impact of biblical ideas on modern-day Israel and the Middle East, and the relationship between Jews and contemporary Christianity and Islam.

"This new sense that there are many Christians who want to hear what Jews have to say fits very well with a dormant Jewish feeling that we have a mission to say something but for a long time people weren't interested in hearing what we have to say," Hazony said.

Though the institute is not focused on Israel as a political ideal, the institute could be seen as a way to keep Christians theologically committed to Israel, said Mark Braverman, a Jewish theologian who is executive director of Kairos USA, a pro-Palestine group.

"What we're seeing now is Israel is of course feeling threatened by world opinions," Braverman said. "They're embarking on all kinds of fancy public relations campaigns. One strategy is to get Christians on their side theologically across the world."

The Herzl Institute aims to serve as a hub for research relating to the "big questions" of human existence through science, ethics, philosophy and religion.

Hazony's book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, took him to the White House in 2012. He spoke to then-chief of staff Jack Lew, who is an Orthodox Jew, and a half-dozen Obama aides about the unifying possibilities of recognizing the Old Testament as philosophy that can be studied by all Americans, including in public schools.

"Especially after the Holocaust, much of Jewish discourse has been about what Jews can do to survive," Hazony said. "Jews of all movements have the same sense, this same feeling that Judaism has been for too long about talking to ourselves."