

Naim St. Ateek -Peace by Justice and Reconciliation

Kairos Palestine and Justice

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The German Protestant Church Congress (Kirchentag)

Motto: "That we may become wise" (Ps. 90:12)

"Peace by Justice and Reconciliation"

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Kairos Palestine & the Achievement of Justice, Peace, & Reconciliation

In the Holy Land

By

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After the 1948 Nakba, the depressed Palestinian remnant that stayed within that part of Palestine that became the state of Israel lived under strict and harsh Israeli military rule. The imposed martial law created a system of control that consisted of three components: cooptation, segmentation, and dependence.

The prophetic voice of the church throughout this period was practically absent. There were no Palestinian church hierarchies at all. They were all foreign. The only voices that were heard against the injustice came from the Communist party whose members included Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

Generally speaking, however, some of the remaining Palestinian church leaders were busy engaged in relief work for the thousands of Palestinian refugees that were evicted by force or fled in fear of the onslaught of the Zionists.

When I review the Palestinian Christian involvement in the struggle for justice and peace, I can identify 4 major developments:

FIRST

The first Arab voice to be heard from an official of the church was the voice of the Melkite **Archbishop Joseph Raya (1916-2005)**. He was Lebanese by birth but Palestinian in upbringing and education. He came to Palestine in 1937 where he studied at St. Anne White Fathers' Seminary in Jerusalem. He was ordained both as Deacon and Priest in Jerusalem in the early 1940's. Few years later he went to the United States where he served in Melkite parishes. He spent 17 years in Birmingham, Alabama where he marched with Martin Luther King during the Civil Rights Movement.

Due to his activism in the Civil Rights Movement, he was appointed as Archbishop of the Melkite community in Galilee – the largest Christian church in Israel. He arrived in 1968 (the same year Martin Luther King was assassinated) and served until 1974.

To my knowledge, Raya was the first prominent Christian leader who raised a clear prophetic voice. He demanded of the Israeli government to give justice to the Palestinians. He championed the case of Iqrit and Kufr Baram – two Christian villages in the north whose inhabitants were evicted by the Zionists. Archbishop Raya called for nonviolent resistance. He led demonstrations and sit-ins to pressure the Israeli government to allow the return of the villagers. Thousands of people marched with him – Christians, Muslims, and Jews but to no avail.

Raya tried his best to use the nonviolent methods and techniques of the civil rights struggle against the Israeli government's injustice; but he was not successful. Raya became very controversial and pressures mounted against him from various sides. He resigned his see in 1974 and left the country and retired in Canada until his death in 2005.

One of his young priests was Elias Chaccour who ten years after Raya left wrote his first book, *Blood Brothers* in 1984. Although Chaccour's book preceded the rise of Palestinian Liberation Theology, it was a very important prelude to it.

I believe Archbishop Raya opened the way for the nonviolent struggle against Israeli injustice and oppression.

SECOND

In the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's, a process of indigenization started within three church denominations in Palestine-Israel. In 1976, the Rev. **Fayek Haddad** became the first Palestinian Anglican bishop in Jerusalem. This was followed by the Lutherans in 1979 when Rev. Dahoud Haddad became the first Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem; and in early January 1988, less than one month after the first intifada, Pope John Paul II consecrated the first Palestinian Roman Catholic (Latin) Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah.

For the first time, three church denominations had indigenous Arab Palestinian bishops. With the eruption of the first intifada in 1987, the voice of the indigenous bishops against the Israeli injustice gradually began to be heard. In fact, the first joint statement against the occupation was signed by all the Patriarchs and Bishops in Jerusalem in January 1988.

The statement said, **"We take our stand with truth and justice against all forms of injustice and oppression. We stand with the suffering and the oppressed. We call upon the faithful to pray and to labor for justice and peace for all the people of our area."**

I remember this statement very well. I had the privilege of drafting it. What was really significant about the statement was that it broke the barrier of fear and silence and emboldened the hierarchy to raise their voice against the injustice.

Since then various statements began to be issued and the voice of some of the hierarchy was heard, even though intermittently and sometimes vaguely.

THIRD

The rise of Palestinian liberation theology in 1989 with the book, **Justice, and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation, Orbis 1989**. The book was received well by the Christian community of the land including its various denominations, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. The book addressed the political, religious, and theological situation in the country from the position of faith. It emphasized the justice of God as well as God's inclusive love for all people. It condemned the Israeli occupation and the oppression of the Palestinian people. It emphasized the importance of nonviolent resistance against the illegal occupation. One significant turning point was when Palestinian Christians began to identify with Jesus as a Palestinian living under occupation. Jesus Christ began to be viewed not only as their liberator but also as their paradigm for resistance and liberation

FOURTH

The fourth development along the way of justice and nonviolence has been expressed in the **Kairos Palestine Document launched in December 2009**. In the midst of the oppressive situation, the Christian community was able to produce a document called, "a moment of Truth." It is a document that speaks primarily to the Christian community of the land. It also speaks to Christians and churches abroad. At the same time, it addresses people of other faiths as well as the political situation in the country and more specifically the Israeli government. The document is courageous enough to consider the occupation a sin and an evil; and calls for nonviolent means to resist it.

The document was produced ecumenically because all those who worked on it belonged to the various churches of the land – bishops, clergy, men and women. So it is a genuine Palestinian Christian voice that speaks truth to power and that witnesses to the possibility of justice and peace for all the people of the land.

Much credit for the writing of this document goes to Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the retired Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem who was a very active member of the group that worked on the document.

Looking back at the last 67 years since the Nakba and the creation of the state of Israel one can say that the Christian community was slow to address the injustice that happened as a result of the Nakba; but we are thankful to God that in spite of the slow beginning, the faith, resilience, and courage of the Palestinian Christians have prompted them to raise their voice and to bear an important testimony before the whole world. Through the Kairos Document, we have been able to lift the banner of justice and peace and to accept Christ's call to us to be peacemakers and to commit ourselves to witness to the love and justice of God.

The Kairos Document candidly addresses the major Palestinian and international groups concerning Palestine:

1. To Palestinian Christians: “To all our Christian brothers and sisters is a word of hope, patience, steadfastness, and new action for a better future. ...We place our hope in God...At the same time, we continue to act in concord with God and God’s will, building, resisting evil and bringing closer the day of justice and peace.” (5.1)
2. To Muslims: “a message of love and of living together and a call to reject fanaticism and extremism. It is also a message to the world that Muslims are neither to be stereotyped as the enemy nor caricatured as terrorists but rather to be lived with in peace and engaged with in dialogue.” (5.4)
3. To Jews: “Even though we have fought one another in the recent past and still struggle today, we are able to love and live together. We can organize our political life, with all its complexity, according to the logic of this love and its power, after ending the occupation and establishing justice.” (5.4.2)
4. To the churches of the world it “is firstly a word of gratitude for the solidarity you have shown toward us in word, deed, and presence among us. It is a word of praise for the many churches and Christians who support the right of the Palestinian people for self-determination. It is a message of solidarity with those Christians and Churches who suffered because of their advocacy for law and justice... Our question to our brothers and sisters in the Churches today is: Are you able to help us get our freedom back, for this is the only way you can help the two peoples attain justice, peace, security and love?” (6.1)
5. To the international community: The appeal to the international community to stand for international law and to exert international pressure on the government of Israel through “a system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel. We repeat once again that this is not revenge but rather a serious action in order to reach a just and definitive peace that will put an end to Israeli occupation of Palestine...and will guarantee security and peace for all. (7)

The important question is this: Why has not the government of Israel been responsive to the call for peace coming not only from the Christian and Muslim communities but from the political Palestinian leadership as well as from many Jewish groups both inside and outside of the country?

The government of Israel has so far refused to make peace. It has been humiliating the Palestinians, confiscating their land, enlarging its illegal settlements, and denying the Palestinians their human and political rights. It is therefore very clear that the government of Israel does not want to implement international law, and refuses to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state. In the last number of years, between the oppression practiced by the Israeli government and the unruly violence of the settlers against the Palestinians, the situation has been continuously deteriorating. It has become abundantly clear that the obstacle to peace is not only the occupation but an endemic racism that is

partly based on exclusive biblical texts from the Hebrew Bible, especially from the Torah, and partly based on Jewish religious literature.

In many ways, the question of racism has become very frightening. Whereas many of us keep emphasizing justice and righteousness as basis for peace like the great prophets of the Old Testament emphasized, today's settlers emphasize the teaching of the Torah. It is the Torah that has authority for them. According to the Torah, there are only two solutions to the problem of the people of the land. According to Numbers 33:50- 53, **"...the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you ...You shall take possession of the land and settle in it..."**

The second solution is prescribed by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy 7:2 **"When the Lord your God bring you into the land...and he clears away many nations before you...[seven nations]...and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy..."**

According to the Torah the solution is either expulsion or annihilation. This is what the militant settlers are advocating today. After the Exile, even though some of the prophets started vacillating between an inclusive theology of God, people, and land, and an exclusive one, we find many texts that still emphasize the exclusive rather than the universal.

In a very surprising text even the writer of Isaiah chapter 61 expressed racist attitudes towards non-Jews. Jesus quoting that text in Luke 4 stopped in mid- sentence and refused to read the racist words.

Ezekiel 47: 21-23, on the other hand, surprises us by critiquing the racist texts in the Torah that talk about the ethnic cleansing of the people of the land; and suggests that Jews and non-Jews can live together in the land and share its inheritance equally.

The settlers today reject any inclusive texts and cling to the exclusive and racist. Furthermore, they are guided by racist attitudes that have developed beyond the Hebrew Bible. Many settlers today are inspired and influenced by the writings of the Talmud and Halacha as well as the exclusionary ethnocentric writings found in Jewish religious literature over many years.

Let me give you a few examples. Please notice that every example has relevance to what is happening today on the ground. This racism guides the actions of militant settlers against the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories i.e. Occupied Palestine.

The following examples exhibit the total contempt and racism which Jewish fundamentalists show toward Palestinians.

Rabbi Abraham Kook the Elder (1865-1935) is the revered father of messianic Jewish fundamentalism. He believed that "The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews – is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle." The teachings of Rabbi Kook have influenced the beliefs and actions of settlers against Palestinians.

Judah Halevi is an important thinker in ultra-Orthodox circles. He was a Jewish poet and philosopher of the 12th century. For many Jewish settlers Halevi is their big prophet. They study each word he writes and they live by his ideas. Halevi believed that Ishmael was inferior. He wrote, "Abraham was the best of men but he contained in himself some bad elements, and these bad elements came out in the form of Ishmael." Halevi said that Jews are the "pick of mankind" and even when some Gentiles are converted to Judaism they cannot become equal to Jews.

Maimonides is another significant figure from the 12 century CE. In his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Book III, chapter 51 he discusses how various sections of humanity can attain the supreme religious value, the true worship of God. Among those who are incapable of even approaching this are: "...the Blacks...their nature is like the nature of mute animals, and according to my opinion, they are not on the level of human beings, and their level among existing things is below that of a man and above that of a monkey..." Recently Ethiopian Jews have been protesting against discrimination in Israel because of such racist teachings.

According to the Halacha, (Halacha is the legal system of classical Judaism and is primarily based on the Babylonian Talmud.) The killing by a Jew of a non-Jew under any circumstances is not regarded as murder. When Rabbi Moshe Levenson was asked about Baruch Goldstein's murder of 29 Muslims at prayer in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron in 1994 and whether he was sorry for their murder, the Rabbi replied "I am sorry not only about dead Arabs but about dead flies."

The term "human beings" in the Halacha refer to Jews only.

Members of Gush Emunim argue that "what appears to be confiscation of Arab-owned land for subsequent settlement by Jews is in reality not an act of stealing but one of sanctification; the land is redeemed by being transferred from the satanic to the divine sphere."

They believe that God gave all of the Land of Israel (including Lebanon and beyond) to the Jews and that Arabs living in Israel are viewed as thieves. So they are liberating the land from the Arabs. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, said, "We must live in this land even at the price of war. Even if there is no peace, we must instigate wars of liberation in order to conquer the land."

These Orthodox settlers are simply acting on their own beliefs. They are only being obedient to what they believe God is asking them to do. This is the racism that is a great obstacle to peace. It is the racism that is being promoted by the rightwing government of Netanyahu. It is important to note that a number of ministers in Netanyahu's government are themselves living in the settlements.

The picture that emerges now is that Israel through its government and its militant settlers is out of control. Israel has decided long ago that it is better to be perceived as savage than as weak. Security is the god that Israel worships and obeys. Israel in many ways has traded freedom for security and in order to maintain security it has been turning to the use of brutal force. More than this, its apartheid and racist character are becoming clearer every day. Racism and oppression are not recipes for peace. Any semblance of democracy which Israel claims to have for its own Jewish people is being eroded by

the presence of racism and violence that are being practiced by both the government and its militant settlers.

The respected Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling has said, **“The values of the (Jewish) religion, at least in its Orthodox and nationalistic form that prevails in Israel, cannot be squared with democratic values. No other variable—neither nationality, nor attitudes about security, nor social or economic values, nor ethnic descent and education – so influences the attitudes of (Israeli) Jews against democratic values as does religiosity.”**

That is why many of these settlers say that they are not interested in human rights but in divine rights. They believe that Judaism contradicts democracy and they would rather obey their religion than man-made democracy.

Tragically therefore, we are not, any more, up against the occupation only. We are up against racism and most of it is based on texts taken from the Torah and from the Jewish religious literature. The prophetic is totally suppressed and the so-called Jewish ethics has become a myth.

Palestinian Liberation Theology confronts racism and oppression:

Palestinian Liberation Theology is, therefore, lifting a theology that confronts racism and oppression:

1. **It is a theology of love;** love of God and of neighbor including love of enemies. We do not seek the destruction of our enemies but their transformation. The Kairos Document reads, “Love is seeing the face of God in every human being. Every person is my brother and my sister. However, seeing the face of God in everyone does not mean accepting evil or aggression on their part. Rather, this love seeks to correct the evil and stop the aggression.”
2. **It is a theology of justice and mercy.** It is important to emphasize that we define justice according to international law. We do not seek the destruction of Israel. We want Israel to live in peace but it must do justice for the Palestinians in accordance with the demands of international law.
3. **It is a theology of nonviolence.** In the face of the Israeli occupation and racism it is important to resist. In the Kairos Document, we write, “Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic. It is thus a creative resistance for it must find human ways that engage the humanity of the enemy. Seeing the image of God in the face of the enemy means taking up positions in the light of this vision of active resistance to stop the injustice and oblige the perpetrator to end his aggression and thus achieve the desired goal, which is getting back the land, freedom, dignity and independence.” (4.2.3)

4. The Kairos Document stresses the importance of using nonviolent means to pressure Israel to change. That is why **we call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions** (BDS). The Kairos Document is clear that nonviolent resistance is not done out of revenge but out of love. It is the logic of love. What is important to emphasize is that an increasing number of Israeli Jews and non-Israeli Jews around the world are courageously advocating for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions.

5. **It is a theology of peace and reconciliation.** For us Christians, to be a peacemaker is a mandate from Christ himself. Yet the peace that can endure is that which is based on justice. When justice is done, peace can be achieved and peace can open the way for reconciliation. The ultimate goal must be reconciliation and healing and not only peace.

Some Signs of hope:

On the political and international level:

1. The European Union (EU) seems to be more daring in its stance against Israeli injustice. EU's response is encouraging. Unfortunately we do not see change coming from the United States due to: 1) the presence of a strong pro-Israel lobby in the Congress, 2) the presence of a strong Christian Zionist groups and neo-cons, 3) the increase in Islamophobia, 4) mutual military interest between Israel and the United States.
2. An increasing number of Jews of conscience are calling for BDS and supporting justice for the Palestinians based on international law. Many Jews support the One-State solution.
3. The increasing influence of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) in the United States. They are Jews of conscience and they are maintaining the prophetic tradition and the ethical heritage of Judaism.
4. The Palestinian Authority is acting with greater reason and wisdom and becoming more active in Europe after joining the various UN organizations like International Criminal Court (ICC).
5. BDS is spreading and slowly making a difference.

On the Religious and Theological level:

1. The Kairos Document recognizes the problem inherent in some biblical texts. It is not only a problem of interpretation of the text but the difficulty within the text itself. I believe that these tribal texts must be rejected.

The Kairos Document states, "... Our task is to safeguard the Word of God as a source of life and not of death, so that "the Good News" remains what it is good news for us and for all. In face of those who use the Bible to threaten our existence as Christian and Muslim Palestinians, we renew our faith in God because we know that the word of God cannot be the source of our destruction." (2.3.4)

"Therefore, we declare that any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice ... transform religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth." (2.4)

2. For most Palestinian Christians, the Bible has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. We are being oppressed in the name of God and the Bible. This must stop. We need German biblical scholars, theologians, and pastors to help in understanding and critiquing the text.

3. We hope that our friends in Germany who are concerned about peace for all the people of Israel-Palestine will work for Germany's greater involvement for the sake of justice. Many of us believe that Germany has an important role to play and it can make a significant contribution towards a just-peace. We hope it is time for Germany to become involved, not only for the sake of the oppressed Palestinians but for the sake of Israel which is destroying itself in the process of destroying the Palestinians.

Some time ago, it was reported that the nephew of Netanyahu has broken ranks with his uncle and he has been calling for economic boycott against Israel.

Jonathan Ben Artzi is a PhD student at Brown University in the United States. He wrote that "equality and social justice will prevail in Israel when the government and people of the United States adopt a no-tolerance stance toward Israel's abuse of Palestinians... Sometimes it takes a good friend to tell you when enough is enough ... If Americans truly are our friends, they should shake us up and take away the keys, because right now we are driving drunk, and without this wake-up call we will soon find ourselves in the ditch of an undemocratic doomed state."

Let me conclude with words from Kairos: "The word of faith says to anyone engaged in political activity: Human beings were not made for hatred. It is not permitted to hate, neither is it permitted to kill or to be killed. The culture of love is the culture of accepting the other. Through it we perfect ourselves and the foundations of society are established." (15)

I pray that God will give us the wisdom and the courage to continue to work together for justice and peace for all the people of the land so that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians and Muslims can live together in peace and reconciliation.