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## **Jerusalem conference calls Christian Zionism a 'heresy'**

by James Solheim

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[ENS] Christian theologians, religious leaders and peace activists meeting in Jerusalem issued a stinging rebuke of "the heretical teachings of Christian Zionism" following the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center's conference "Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict," held April 14-18.

Released at the conclusion of the five-day meeting, the statement says that Christian Zionism, in its extreme form, "places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice." The statement, adopted by more than 600 participants from 32 countries at the conference's conclusion on April 18, declared that "we categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as a false teaching that undermines the biblical message of love, mercy and justice."

The conference itself was bracketed by two new developments in the ongoing Mideast crisis: the memoranda of agreement between US President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on April 14 that, according to the statement, moved the crisis "into a new phase of oppression of the Palestinian people"; and the targeted assassination of a second Hamas leader in Gaza, Abdul Aziz Rantisi.

In the letters, Bush endorsed Sharon's plans for a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, calling it "a real contribution to peace," as well as "historic and courageous." While repeating his commitment to a two-state solution, Bush went further than any previous American president in stating that the settlements in the West Bank are "new realities on the ground" and it would be "unrealistic" to expect Israel to abandon them. The official position of the US in the past has been that the settlements are obstacles to peace.

Bush also said that Palestinian refugees uprooted by previous wars could not expect to return to what is now Israel, thereby rejecting the argument for a "right to return" that was a major point of contention in any final negotiation.

"The Presiding Bishop has already issued a statement to the President on the Episcopal Church's long commitment to a just peace process. This sea change in U.S. policy will require a response from the U.S. mainline churches not seen since the anti-apartheid movement," said the Rev. Brian J. Grieves, the Episcopal Church's peace officer in the U.S. and a conference participant. "Otherwise, we are staring at a crushing injustice against the Palestinian people. The fact that half the participants at the conference were from the U.S. and Canada was perhaps the most hopeful sign."

### **Ignoring the Palestinians**

Arab leaders were quick to condemn the letters of agreement, charging that the US had abandoned any claim to a role as an "honest broker" by adopting the Israeli position and

completely ignoring the role of the Palestinians. They warned that the policy shift would have serious repercussions. "It undermines hope for a just and comprehensive peace, inflames feelings of enmity towards America and opens the door towards retaking these rights by force, through all legitimate means of resistance," said President Emile Lahoud of Lebanon. Others insisted that it would close the door on the so-called "Road Map" to peace, dealing a crippling and perhaps final blow to what remains of current Mideast peace efforts.

The assassination of Rantisi wiped out a scheduled day in Bethlehem for participants, underscoring the difficulty of movement in the Jerusalem area during times of increased tension.

The conference's final statement affirmed that a just and lasting peace must be based on the principles articulated in the Jerusalem Sabeel Document (at [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org)) that calls for two sovereign states, Palestine and Israel, living in a confederation, possibly with neighboring countries, with Jerusalem serving as the federal capital. "The ideal and best solution has always been to envisage ultimately a bi-national state in Palestine-Israel where people are free and equal, living under a constitutional democracy that protects and guarantees all their rights, responsibilities, and duties without racism or discrimination. One state for two nations and three religions," the statement said.

#### Christian remnant

Welcoming the participants, the Rev. Naim Ateek, director of the Sabeel Center in East Jerusalem, urged them to "see how we are suffering daily humiliation-and carry this picture to the rest of the body of Christ and to the world."

Ateek and others have warned for years that Christians in Israel are under increasing pressure. The Rev. Elias Chacour, a prominent educator and a Greek Catholic from Galilee, said that "it is more difficult to speak out because of threats to the small Christian community in the Holy Land. The small remnant is disappearing day after day because they don't see any hope in the future." He decried the violence and said that "we are facing a progression of funerals on both sides. No more martyrs." Palestinians and the international community are desperately searching for signs of hope and trust, he said.

Sabeel, which means "the way" or a channel or spring of life-giving water in Arabic, celebrated its fifth anniversary at the conference. It is a grassroots movement among Palestinian Christians who are striving to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for different national and faith communities.

#### Canterbury's absence stirs protest

Tensions in the region also seeped into the conference in a dramatic way when Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams decided not to deliver a keynote address in person, reportedly at the urging of local religious leaders. Instead Williams sent his ecumenical secretary to read his remarks. Making apologies, the Rev. Jonathan Gough said that the archbishop's priority "is to be able to act as a bridge builder" and that his attendance "could be misunderstood."

While meeting with participants-who expressed disappointment and anger-Gough said that the archbishop's first responsibility is holding the church together and, as a world leader, the stakes are high, requiring him to carefully weigh the risks of being identified with "the wrong voices"

on the issues. Some participants pointed out that the archbishop's address talked almost exclusively about Israel, offering no hope for the Palestinians. They also noted that he didn't mention Sabeel at all-which, they said, suggested he doesn't understand its role and vision. "If he can't stand by Sabeel, then he's part of the problem," one participant said, wondering if the archbishop was rejecting the role of Sabeel as a bridge.

Ateek said that Williams was invited not just because he is a prominent church leader but because he is a good theologian. He expressed disappointment that the address didn't really deal with the issues of the conference.

In his address, Williams said that "Jew and Christian share a common conviction in that they have one calling: to be the place where wisdom and justice make their home in history, on earth. In light of that they have the freedom to call each other to account, despite their differences." In a long narrative on the role of Israel, Williams wrote: "It helps to ask what the covenantal promise is thought to be for in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the answer, given in various forms in parts of Leviticus, in many strands of the prophetic tradition, especially the Second Isaiah, in aspects of the Wisdom literature, might be summarised by saying that Israel is called to be the paradigm nation, the example held up to all nations of how a people lives in obedience to God and justice with one another."

Strong voices stir conference

If there was disappointment with the address by Williams, there was none with a string of other powerful speakers-passionate, perceptive and critical of the alliances of politics and theology represented by Christian Zionism.

The Rev. Stephen Sizer, an Anglican priest who chairs the International Bible Society in the United Kingdom, said that the thesis of Christian Zionism is that "every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God and should be condoned-period." He said that the movement's influence is immense, with as many as 100 million adherents in the US. Christian Zionism, he said, dates back to early 19th century England, when a commitment to restore the Jews to Palestine as an antecedent to Christ's Second Coming and the end of the world began to take shape.

Conservative British politicians like Lord Balfour were convinced that the purpose of history is to carry out the divine purpose. But Balfour was "entirely duplicitous," said Sizer, because he never intended to take into account the people already living in Palestine. Yet Balfour is responsible for giving Zionism political legitimacy, especially in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which called for the establishment of a Jewish state.

Christian Zionists typically are ultra-literalist in their interpretation of Scripture, support Jerusalem as the "eternal and exclusive" capital of Israel, favor rebuilding the Jewish temple on Mount Zion, and express antipathy for Arabs who stand in the way of such a vision, Sizer said.

But Rosemary Radford Ruether of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley warned participants not to assume that Christian Zionism "is a problem of fanatics and fundamentalists." She said that there is also subtle collaboration with Israel and a "sophisticated and unconscious Zionism" in mainline Christian churches. She deplored the tendency to think that good relations with Jews comes only by ignoring the Palestinians, therefore making them pay for others' sins against the Jews. "Christians in the West must look at ways to break that silence about Jewish

election-promises of land and restoration as part of a redemptive process."

"What is the appropriate repentance for Western Christians who bear the burden of guilt?" she asked. "Not collaboration with another injustice. One evil does not justify another."

Describing what he called the "strange synthesis" between Zionism and religion, Israeli journalist Gershom Gorenberg of the Jerusalem Report said that Christian Zionism represents a classic anti-Jewish theology because, at the end of its "script," Jews either convert or die. He said that Christian millennialists who look for the return of Jesus to establish his kingdom are not Zionists, because they have no concern for the welfare of Jews. The fulfillment of the prophesied "end times," rather than peace, is their goal. In such a scenario, Palestinian Arabs-Christian and Muslim alike-become mere stage props in the drama. "We must get to a better place, even if it is not a perfect place," he added.

### Misuse of scripture

Barbara Rossing of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago dealt directly and convincingly with the misuse of the New Testament book of Revelation in supporting Christian Zionist theology. "It is a highly political but deeply spiritual book," she said, "that helps us see empire differently." When Revelation was written, Rome had just reoccupied the region and the book's writer, John, looked at the situation and "addressed the issue of justice, giving us eyes to see our world."

But Revelation is not meant to be read literally, Rossing said. "It is one of the most daring critiques of empire" in the New Testament, one that "looks the powers in the face and says that 'Rome won't last, God will.'" Rossing said that Revelation offers "a vision of healing and renewal." But its prophecy is a wake-up call, a word of warning to the people, not a set of predictions. Fundamentalists never get to the last chapter that describes the New Jerusalem and God's renewed vision of community, she said. "It lays out God's vision for all time, not restricted to someone's time-line. It is also written from the underside, at a time more hopeless and violent than our own. The non-violent Lamb conquers by shedding its own blood," she said.

The Rev. Don Wagner, professor of religion and director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University in Chicago, noted that Christian Zionists are opposed to Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip because they say it would violate the Biblical mandate that the land of Israel belongs to the Jews. To Christian Zionists, the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 was a sign that the "end times" were nearing. The clock of prophecy began to tick the countdown for the return of Jesus and the building of a new Temple that would mean destruction of the Dome of the Rock, a holy site of Islam on what the Jews call the Temple Mount, he said.

According to Wagner, Christian Zionism projects a theology of empire and anticipates the final battle, "anxious for Armageddon." It views the modern state of Israel as a continuation of Biblical Israel and therefore deserving of complete support, he said, though "of course that undermines the continuing presence of other churches in the Middle East."

Tracing some of the political convergences, Wagner said that in 1977 the conservative Likud Party began to court the Christian Right in the US. When President Jimmy Carter said that the Palestinians have a right to a homeland, he lost his support for re-election, while two-term President Ronald Reagan talked openly about Armageddon and held pro-Israeli briefings in the

White House, linking US foreign policy with the future of Israel.

Glory, not suffering

Yet Christian Zionists are actually making the safety of Israel untenable, argued the Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor who is director of the International Center in Bethlehem. He noted that there were a number of "recovering Christian Zionists" at the conference, including some speakers. The Christian presence in Jerusalem is a problem for Zionists. "We are there as a stumbling block, erected originally by Christ," he said. "The theology of Christian Zionists is one of glory, not suffering. They are interested in power, they need victories. They are the true anti-Semites because they want to bring Jews to Israel to slay two-thirds of them as part of the end of time," he said. "We are the continuation of the first disciples. If you identify with that then we have a place to start." Raheb joined others in acknowledging that it is possible to deal with Israel politically but not theologically, because "only the kingdom of God can claim that status."

"Christian Zionism is very dangerous and difficult to confront," said the Rev. Rafik Khoury, a priest of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, in tracing its growth and power, especially in the international community. He said Christian Zionists are causing major problems for Israel's indigenous Christian community, "embarrassing" Christian churches because it is not always possible for people to distinguish differences among different groups. "They are fragmenting a Christian community already fragmented." The challenge is to expose the ideology with intellectual efforts, he said, but he also called for an international campaign similar to those waged against the Vietnam War and apartheid South Africa.

Christian Right in power

Several speakers called for similar action. Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC, and co-chair of the US Campaign to End Israeli Occupation, said that there is a growing divide between US policy and international world opinion. She called for a global peace movement to counter some of the Bush administration's policies, calling the awesome power of the US "a dangerous reality." The American people and others around the world are "beginning to see through some of the lies" and they are turning against the war in Iraq, she said. While they have not been able to stop the war, public opinion is robbing the war of its legitimacy, she asserted. "And Palestine is no longer marginal to the world peace movement," she added.

Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and chair of the peace and justice studies program at the University of San Francisco, was even more blunt, arguing that the Christian Right controls the Republican Party and half the US states-and for the first time a majority of the party is pro-Israel. "Right-wing Zionist Jews are now forming policy, representing a shift in the center of gravity," he said. The Bush administration, he warned, feels called by God to rid the world of evil. "Yet Israel gets by with murder because it has the unqualified support of the world's only superpower," he said.

Dr. Mubarak Awad, founder of Nonviolence International in Washington, DC, wondered why the friends of Israel were so much more effective than the friends of the Palestinians. "We must work to get rid of fear and hate, convincing the Israelis that we are both human beings," said Awad, who was jailed and still faces deportation for his non-violent activities. He said it is

important to avoid a direct conflict between Judaism and Islam. "Nobody is born violent," he said, but sometimes "people who feel they are already dead think they have nothing to lose."

"There are progressive Jews who seek solidarity with Palestinians, but the question now is whether Palestine will survive," said Marc Ellis, director of the Center for American and Jewish Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Ellis did not see the occupation ending or the removal of settlements in the West Bank. "We are running out of time to effect change," he warned. "The Jewish prophetic voice will never die but the situation is increasingly desperate."

Jeff Halper, an American-born Jew who heads a group opposed to the demolition of Palestinian homes, said he detected a climate of "power, triumphalism, American Empire" and what he called "democratic imperialism" with the new Bush-Sharon agreements. "This is a turning point," he said-the end of the occupation. "There are new political parameters on the ground and the Palestinians must now adjust. They are facing the concept that this is no longer a political conflict but a clash of civilizations" with which it is much more difficult to deal.

Halper said that Israel would eventually create a mini-state to absorb four million Palestinians, leaving Israel in complete control. The Palestinians will be "locked forever into Bantustans," similar to apartheid South Africa. "It's all unilateral-the Palestinians are not part of this, they get nothing."

A malady called hope

Jonathan Kuttab, a Palestinian human rights lawyer, was equally gloomy because "the situation just gets worse." He said he was particularly annoyed by the Archbishop of Canterbury's address because, in his opinion, it laid out the theological imperatives for recognizing Jewish statehood without recognizing the people already on the land. "There was no reference to the people who had to be displaced. Where is the Good News for the Palestinian people?" he asked.

Kuttab admitted that the conference "brings together so many depressing facts it leaves us helpless and hopeless," yet he found some encouragement in the example of South Africa, where the apartheid regime was doomed because it was built on injustice. "Injustice in this part of the world can't prevail forever," he said. "The One who is with us is greater than the forces arrayed against us." He argued that "Christian Zionism needs to be challenged on the human, moral cost and the consequences of their theology."

Earlier, a more hopeful note was sounded by Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of a conflict resolution center in Bethlehem, who was blocked from attending the conference and addressed the participants by telephone. "We have an incurable malady called hope," he said, arguing that a "non-violent strategy can help us address Israeli society-and they are the only ones who can change government policies." Yet he added that "we need a jump-start to move away from the deadlocked peace process. A strategy for waging peace should replace the strategy of waging war."

Zoughbi and other speakers said that the West is "still hostage to guilty feelings" over the Holocaust, and that is complicating the peace efforts. It is time to shift from blame and guilt to collective responsibility, he said. "We are seeking to bring Israel to its senses, not to its knees."

Last chance for peace?

During a day-long program in the West Bank city of Ramallah, the group also met with President Yassir Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. Clearly buoyed by the size and range of the conference, Arafat said that he was still confined to "this prison" after two years. He called attention to the suffering of his people, now increased by the Israeli construction of the barrier wall, a move that has led to confiscation of Palestinian land and destruction of olive groves. "In spite of all of our troubles, we are committed to peace," he said.

Hanan Ashrawi, an Episcopalian who has served as spokesperson for peace efforts, joined Arafat and blasted the new agreements between Bush and Sharon. "This destroys and undermines any chance for peace," she said. "This unholy alliance can't continue. God did not talk to George Bush to tell him how to redistribute our land." She said that the solution must be legal, just and peaceful, based on the recognition that many of the political policies are bankrupt. "It is up to you to present a different narrative," she said. "We count on you to be the voice of the Palestinians."

#### Damage to the soul

Preaching at the closing worship service at the Notre Dame Center, former presiding bishop Edmond Lee Browning seemed to capture many of the emotions that had been running through the conference. (Both he and his wife Patti were honored by Sabeel for their long commitment to peace in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.)

"Clearly the Christian community is divided between two views," Browning said. "One view would see God's plan being enacted through the return of the Jewish people to Israel, to be followed by Armageddon and the second coming of Christ. The other holds up a vision of this land based not on an interpretation of scripture but on a God of justice as revealed in the totality of Scriptures... Any vision that says God would bring about deliverance for one group at the expense of suffering and injustice to another group of people is just simply not acceptable Christian theology. Indeed, it is not of God."

He saluted the "incredible humanity" of the suffering Palestinians "which is assaulted but never defeated. The world community carries the burden of guilt for their continued oppression-none more so than my country, the United States of America. The news of President Bush's giveaway to Prime Minister Sharon underscores the US role as co-oppressor of the Palestinian people.... The so-called wall of separation is only one more travesty of justice heaped upon the draconian measures that define the Occupation."

Browning told the story of George Khoury, a Palestinian Christian murdered because Palestinian militants thought he was a Jew. "The death of George Khoury encapsulates in many ways the foolishness of both the occupiers and those who think revenge is a solution... We simply cannot let either the Israeli or Palestinian people be lost in a sea of violence driven by fanaticism that threatens to engulf the very souls of both people who claim this land. Damage of the soul is done to both oppressor and the oppressed. Both must seek the vision of God that sees a future built on justice, repentance, restoration, forgiveness and reconciliation."

"We know that for many Jewish people there is a sense of darkness, a fear of enemies all around who wish them harm. And they lose innocent lives in acts of dreadful violence," Browning said, but the future lies in the words of Isaiah: "If you put an end to oppression, to every gesture of

contempt, and to every evil word; if you give food to the hungry and satisfy those who are in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon."

--James Solheim is the former director of Episcopal News Service.