

Sacred Space Denied: Bethlehem and the Wall

A film by Peter J. Nagle

\$15 for DVD & booklet, plus shipping

The film (DVD with booklet included) illustrates the problem around Bethlehem.

If you would like copies or more information, please contact:

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What viewers are saying:

“It [The film] gives an excellent visual record of the reality of the Wall and the ominous presence of the settlements – which as you know I am sure, are continuing to be build at an even more rapid pace. I was especially moved by the witness and story of the Palestinian farmer who build his home, and had it violated and his land divided by the Wall.”

Bishop Margaret Payne, New England Synod of the ELCA

“This has to be one of the most informative reports in dealing with the Separation Wall and how it impinges on the rights of another people. A must for those interested in understanding the conflict in Israel/Palestine.”

Fr. Peter F. Vaska, OFM, President, Franciscan Foundation of the Holy Land

“According to Jewish tradition, ‘That which comes from the heart enters the heart’. Your film clearly came from the heart and its message enters the heart of the viewer. We think it was very effective. You stayed on message, spoke softly and clearly and poignantly. We do think that for people to really appreciate the full impact, they must see it with their own eyes.”

Rabbi Herb and Rose Weinberg, Jerusalem

<http://www.yale.edu/divinity/notes/051208/nagle.html>

Peter Nagle '96 M.A.R. Hopes Film Will Nurture Peace in Holy Land

By Jeffrey Pierce '06 M.Div.

A man in khaki slacks and a sharp blue sport shirt, his sleeves rolled up against the heat, walks forward along a gently curving road. The camera pans left over the stone wall beside the road and across a deep and terraced valley. Atop the ridge on the far side of the valley is an expansive settlement known as Gilo, home to some 29,000 Israeli settlers.

The man is Peter Nagle '96 M.A.R., founder of the organization “Friends of Bethlehem,” a ministry devoted to supporting and assisting peace organizations in the Bethlehem area. The camera returns to him as he stands at the roadside looking across the valley. He points toward the settlement, noting that Jerusalem and the Green Line— Israel 's original border established almost six decades ago—lie some two kilometers behind it. To the right he identifies Route 60, one of Israel 's many “bypass roads” that serve to connect Israeli settlements in the West Bank to one another and to Israel. These roads are for Israelis only; without special permits obtained from the Israeli military, Palestinians are prohibited from traveling them.

“This entire Cremisan Valley,” Nagle explains with apparent remorse, “will be annexed to Gilo-annexed to Israel.”

This is one of the scenes in a 2005 film produced by Nagle, “Sacred Space Denied: Bethlehem and the Wall.” He has worked in finance for the past 26 years but felt an urgent spiritual need to bring his concerns about the Israel/Palestinian situation to the public. He is also a principal of The Arik Institute, an Israeli organization devoted to peace and reconciliation with Palestinians. To make the film, Nagle traveled to the West Bank four times in the past year alone.

Nagle first encountered the valley in 2002 during his initial trip to the Holy Land. There he met the Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Lutheran pastor affiliated with the Lutheran-based, ecumenically oriented International Center of Bethlehem. During a subsequent trip to the valley in December 2004, Raheb took Nagle to see the wall around Bethlehem, including the place where the wall encompasses the Cremisan Valley.

Beautiful valley, filled with fruit trees

“It's one of the most beautiful, pristine valleys, filled with fruit trees,” said Nagle in a recent interview. “A fruit tree or an olive tree for a Palestinian is not just something they own, but something they care for.” He described the care and affection the Palestinians show these trees, tending them as if they were children to be adored. Among other things, it was the injustice against this affection that so engendered Nagle's regret and concern.

If the intention were merely self-protection, Nagle reasons, the Israeli government would have built the wall just outside of Gillo, on the far side of the valley. Instead, the wall was built on the Palestinian side, along the edge of the Palestinian town Beit Jala, cutting off the valley from those who had cultivated it for centuries. The government seems to be pushing the wall out as far as possible, the settlements expanding further and further into the territories of the West Bank.

Nagle believes Israeli leaders have well represented their side in the conflict, making good use of the media to portray their need for protection against Palestinian terrorism. The Palestinians, he fears, have not fared as well, having failed to communicate their plight as an occupied territory. As a result, Nagle worries that Americans are not well informed about what is really happening in the West Bank. He faults the American media for their limited coverage and the American public for their limited interest.

Yet Nagle refrains from simple finger pointing. He believes that Christians share the blame collectively, for not having defended the Jews through periods of severe anti-Semitism: “Our inaction and our racism created the ground in which this situation could arise.”

An attempt to tell the whole story

“This film is a small attempt at getting people to see that what we're being told is not the full story,” said Nagle in the interview. He and Raheb strategized together about how best to respond, determining to make the film in conjunction with a booklet and a lobbying effort in Washington, DC. The booklet, “O Little Town of Bethlehem: What is its future?” is complete; the lobbying effort has yet to find fruition.

Narrated by Nagle's wife, Joy, “Sacred Space Denied” focuses on the building of the wall around the area of the “Bethlehem Triangle,” consisting of the towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and

Beit Sahour. “In many areas, including Bethlehem, the wall has been built well inside the West Bank, in order to include the settlements,” Nagle tells viewers. “This wall confiscates Palestinian lands, attaching them to the settlements and making them part of Israel.”

According to the booklet, the separation wall is a “400-mile-long system of 26-foot-tall concrete walls with watch posts every 200 meters or layers of razor wire with electric fencing, sensors and cameras.” It claims the wall affects 10 percent of the land area of the West Bank and in the Bethlehem district runs some 30 miles, confiscating more than 17,500 acres of land belonging to Christian and Muslim Palestinians.

Nagle has sustained an enduring curiosity about the region, having long read from papers like Israel's Ha'aretz Daily and the Jerusalem Post. His interest in the “Palestinian question,” however, is newer. The seed was planted in him when a member of his faith community, The Benedictine Grange in West Redding, CT, gave a presentation on the West Bank some 10 years ago. It is a seed that has germinated in Nagle “gradually and subliminally” over the years.

Nagle's own ministry in Palestine is one of several organic ministries that have arisen within the Benedictine Grange; other ministries include work in Nicaragua, Appalachia, Africa, and now Houston and the Gulf Coast. Nagle points to the community's contemplative and inclusive atmosphere as the reason it has spawned so many lay-led ministries. “Father John never got up and said we need a ministry for Nicaragua, it's just a fertile ground, with a lot of room for inspiration.”

An encouraging response to the film

The film has already seen limited showing among American audiences, and Nagle has been encouraged by the response, which he describes as “not reacting to the film but to the information it presents.” Nagle didn't hope for questions about the making of the film but questions about the situation in the West Bank ; thus far that is precisely what he has gotten: “How can this be? Why didn't we know about this? Why doesn't our media tell us about this?”

Though he has yet to screen the film among Israeli or Palestinian audiences, Nagle has shown it to many of his Jewish American friends. He was nervous about how they

would react, but many have responded with comments like, “Pete, it just tells the truth.”

Nagle intends the film not strictly to solve anything but to start a conversation, especially among Americans, whom he believes to have enabled the conflict in the West Bank. “The United States supports Israel completely, with both military and economic aid,” he asserted in the interview. And he faults the United States for not pressing Israel to withdraw to the 1967 borders that existed prior to the Six Day War and occupation of the West Bank.

Nagle acknowledges that the conflict in the West Bank is complex, a situation that cries out for responses that are not simply “pro-Israeli” or “pro-Palestinian.” “I support Israel,” Nagle said. “I want them to thrive—but the wall is not going to add to their security.” Nagle views the building of the wall as counter-productive to the quest for peace and security, since by many accounts it is a strategy of land acquisition. “Confiscating people's land unnecessarily,” he asserts in the film, “cannot possibly lead to peace.”

In the film, Nagle is pictured at one point on Manger Street in Bethlehem, overlooking Har Homa, an Israeli settlement outside Beit Sahour. “Har Homa is a kind of looming presence,” he says, “so that Har Homa and the other settlements that surround Bethlehem are a constant reminder to Palestinians that at any time their land can be taken from them.”

A dream shattered

The impending threat of confiscation is embodied in the film through an interview with Mitri Ghneim, a Greek Orthodox Palestinian born in Jaffa. Ghneim and his wife traveled to Amman in 1967 to visit his uncle, awaking the next morning to hear news of the war. Despite his mother's repeated application for family reunification, he was denied access to return home until 1979.

Ghneim finally bought land in the West Bank after 13 years in Amman, acquiring a license to build in 1982. “When I built the foundation, rising step by step, I felt it was my kingdom, my life. My dream started to come true for me and my family. We were very happy until we received the letter that there was going to be a tunnel and a road here. That is when our suffering began.” The Israeli military confiscated a substantial portion of

Ghneim's land in order to build a section of Route 60 that includes a major tunnel.

“I had a nervous breakdown when I started to see bulldozers raze my land and uproot my trees,” Ghneim tells viewers of the film, still disturbed by the episode. “As a result of this nervous breakdown, I was admitted to a hospital. I was treated for about two years.”

“Under Israeli regulations their property was confiscated for ‘public use,’” the booklet explains. “Current Israeli plans call for the 26-foot concrete wall to surround their house on three of four sides, a scant six feet from the Ghneim house, taking both their land and their very access to sunlight and wind.” The film shows Ghneim leading the camera crew around the grounds of his property, pointing with disbelief to the markers where the wall is to be built.

It is Nagle's conviction that Israelis and Palestinians want to be in relationship with each other. Palestinians have told him they look up to Israel, as though Israel were their big brother from whom they have much to learn. On their side, the Israelis find the Palestinians to be a people of great heart. The wall, which makes this relationship all but impossible, could be seen as a tragic caricature of Robert Frost's maxim: “Good fences make good neighbors.” “How can you speak with people when there's a wall between them?” Nagle asks.

Yet the wall does not always divide Israelis from Palestinians: just as often, the wall divides Palestinians from one another, especially in East Jerusalem. Danny Seideman, an Israeli Jew and an expert on the Separation Fence who is interviewed in the film, believes the wall could actually be hurting the Israeli cause. He tells viewers, “It may well be that the wall as currently designed in Jerusalem may bring the Israelis less security rather than more security, and perhaps be so far-reaching as to jeopardize the possibility of future political agreements.”

A shared desperation for peace

Nagle believes people on both sides not only know what is necessary for peace but have a “desperation” for peace. Noting that military service is compulsory for Israeli citizens, Nagle recalls the story of two young Israeli men who killed themselves because they felt that serving in the military would put them in the role of oppressor. “We don't hear about this,”

said Nagle, “[but many] people want nothing to do with the occupation.”

Nagle envisions no ideal response to the film. Rather, he wants to allow room for God to inspire his viewers as God might choose, modeling the hope that has moved him and other members of the Benedictine Grange. “I ask you to leave room for God's grace to move you to take some action toward peace,” is Nagle's appeal at film's end.

Nagle hopes to distribute the film to religious groups of all faiths. To defray costs, he is selling the DVD and 27-page booklet for \$15. Orders can be placed by contacting Nagle directly at friendsofbethlehem@fastmail.fm

Meanwhile, students and faculty at Yale Divinity School are preparing for their own trip to the Holy Land. Joel Hanisek '06 M.Div. conceived of a travel seminar to Palestine, enlisting the help of professors Serene Jones, Jeremy Hultin, and Wes Avram. The group hosted Nagle on Sterling Divinity Quadrangle November 28 to view the film, followed by discussion.

Nagle suggests that students might be interested in bringing the video into their own congregations, but his approach is low-key since he does not want to “foist” his ministry on other people.

Nagle enrolled at Yale Divinity School a decade ago to discover, in his words, the “difference between religion and theology.” While religion has been distorted throughout history for reasons of power, greed and domination—not least of all in the Holy Land itself—a return to faithfulness would be a move toward justice, he says, “about getting some semblance of God's justice on earth.”

Despite the distorting capabilities of religion, Nagle believes the name “Holy Land” is appropriate: “God's relationship with humankind started there. It's on the ground. It's symbolic, but it has a reality also.”

In keeping with that, the film concludes: “The spiritual heritage of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emanated from this land. [This land] is greater than any one of our traditions. As such, it cries out not to be possessed, or to have more borders or walls, but to be shared peacefully, and fairly, with the generosity of spirit with which it was given to us.”

Postscript:

Early in November, while in Bethlehem for a peace conference, Peter Nagle traveled with Yitzhak Frankenthal of Jerusalem to the town of Jenin to offer condolences to the family of a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, Ahmad Chatib, who was mistakenly shot by Israeli Defense Forces. The boy was evacuated to an Israeli hospital by the IDF where he died. The Palestinian family donated their son's organs, as a gesture of peace, to Israeli children in need of organ transplants. Ahmad's organs saved Israeli children's lives. Pictured above, left, is Ismael Chatib, father of the slain boy, and Frankenthal, right, a Jewish Israeli who speaks of his own son's death at the hands of Hamas in 1994. Since that time, Frankenthal has made it his life's work to seek reconciliation with Palestinian parents who have also lost children in the conflict.