At the Threshold of New Theological Thinking

In the second half of the 20th century, two tragic events caused theological thinking to change: the Holocaust and the Nakba.

**The Holocaust**: The theological change was not immediate after the end of WW2 but some western theologians started to feel that the centuries-old racist phenomenon of antisemitism that contributed to the heinous tragedy not only had theological roots but also theological repercussions. Actually, it was after the 1967 war that we began to see the mushrooming of largely western groups of scholars, Christians and Jews, engaging in dialogue that touched on practically all issues that marred Christian-Jewish relations for centuries.
The "miraculous" victory of the 1967 war and the Israeli expansion into vast areas of the surrounding Arab countries not only removed the perceived threat of Israel's destruction (the threat of another Holocaust), but also gave Israelis feelings of security due to their realization of the military might of Israel. Physically and psychologically the state of Israel became more secure and self-confident and that in turn enhanced and promoted Christian-Jewish dialogue.

The establishment of the state of Israel began to be perceived as the antithesis to the Holocaust. Whereas the Holocaust was considered as the lowest point in Jewish history and the culmination of thousands of years of tragedy and suffering, the creation of Israel and the return of millions of Jews to the land signified their rising from the dead. As the 1967 war opened the way for the rise of the state of Israel signified their rising from the dead. That is why Ezekiel 37 (the valley of dry bones) was invoked so frequently by western Christians and Jews and was interpreted as being fulfilled in the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

The interfaith dialogue flung open a door to interject a Palestinian perspective and the Church and the Jewish People trying to the times.

All the sins and crimes carried out against the Jewish people by Christians, Christianity, and the church were exposed and confessed.

As the 1967 war opened the way for the rise of Holocaust theology, it opened many people’s eyes to the existence of the Palestinians as a people. It was, however, left to the first intifada of 1987 to make the world see them not only as refugees in need of philanthropy but also as politically dispossessed people who were ousted by force from their homes and country and were in need of a political solution as well as humanitarian assistance.

The Nakba: During these vigorous inter-faith discussions between the 1960’s and the 1980’s, the Palestinians remained invisible. They were hardly mentioned in the dialogues. The agenda was pregnant with Jewish-Christian concerns. I personally remember how difficult and painful it was for me as a member of the WCC Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People trying to interject a Palestinian perspective and not being heard.

The Holocaust made the change in theological thinking inevitable. As an example, the two-covenant theology was created not necessarily because it was based on sound biblical exegesis, but because it was contextually relevant to the times.

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New Awakenings: Confronting the Truth

By Mary Grey

Introduction: a personal journey

Like many Christian theologians I was very shocked when I first discovered what had happened in the Holocaust and, gradually, in the entire history of anti-Semitism in Western Europe. I read everything I could lay my hands on, including both Christian and Jewish attempts to answer the theological question, “Where was God?” At the same time, without being able to travel to Palestine, I began to discover that there was another side to the story of suffering and displacement. I naïvely thought that the way forward for peace was to try to reconcile both Christian and Jewish attempts to answer the theodicy question. How the Jews and the Church had dealt with the Holocaust affected him deeply: it was through a succession of personal encounters – together with the effect of Liberation Theology – that he was able to confront the actual realities. The late Michael Prior, Vincentian priest and liberation theologian, came to the situation from a combination of commitment to the Palestinian people, frequent visits to the West Bank, and a long practice of reading the Bible with a liberation exegesis. Yet the process of freeing himself from the dominant school of biblical thinking on the Israeli right to inhabit the “promised land” was not an easy one.

1. Christian theological responses to the Holocaust

Christian theologians have almost entirely - and with good reason - followed the pathway of guilt and repentance with regard to the systemic suffering of the Jews in the war and throughout western history: they have sought to take seriously the responsibility of Christian theology for an anti-Judaism that provided a seed-bed for anti-Semitism. Themes such as blaming the Jews for first rejecting and then killing Christ, regarding the Covenant as superseded by the Christ event, (supersessionism), reading Hebrew Scriptures only as important for pre-figuring Christ are key elements in this anti-Judaism. The Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, Nostra Aetate began to address the issues in recognising the significance of the three Biblical faiths in salvation history. Shortly after this, the Good Friday prayer for the “perfidious Jews” was removed from the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church.

But the most thoroughgoing critique of the deep-seated theological roots of anti-Judaism in Christian Theology arrived with Rosemary Radford Ruerhe's foundational work, Faith and Fratricide: the Theological Roots of anti-Semitism. It remains a key text. Creative explorations followed, such as Mary Boys ‘Has God only One Blessing? Judaism as source of Christian Self-Understanding’. Jewish Studies began to flourish in the academy, especially in the United States.

One theologian, recognised as prominent in seeking a new understanding of the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people was Paul Van Buren. He, too, was deeply shocked by the “ovens of Auschwitz”. In his attempt to reverse the anti-Judaism of early Christianity, he tried to bring the two faiths together in one covenant, framing God’s covenant with the Jews as the basis for Christian revelation. But the down side of his re-thinking is his attitude to the land: it is not the spiritual guidance of Moses but the military leadership of Joshua in accomplishing that possession that captures Van Buren’s attention.

He sees the promise of the land, as an integral part of the completion of God’s plan and of the sacred bond that reunites the “two faiths”. As Mark Braverman says, there are hints here of the Christian Zionist position. The notions of covenant and land are already flagged up as key concepts not only between Christians and Jews, but as yet unexplored territory as regards the injustice meted out on the Palestinians.

In fact, in this initial period of re-thinking, there was a deepening silence with regard to the suffering of the displaced Palestinians: not until the beginning of the eighties did the tide begin to turn – and would become a mounting crescendo of concern at the time of the First Intifada.

2. New Awakenings - Confronting the Truth

It was by being confronted with the truth of the harsh realities of life in Palestine that the sea change occurred for both Christian and Jewish theologians. Rosemary Ruehe herself states that when writing Faith and Fratricide, she was unaware of conditions in the Middle East, which she had never visited, but came to recognize that the Jewish community was using the anti-Semitic issue to give a blank check to the state of Israel and so I needed to know something about that. So I went on a trip with Jewish feminists that was billed as ecumenical... in 1980, but got to see the realities a bit and then went back for an extended stay in Tantur, meanwhile reading a lot about the issue. Once one sees what is actually happening one has to critique it.

A similar reaction was experienced by Oxford New Testament Professor, Christopher Rowland. Brought up with the inherited deep-seated anti-Judaism described above, the Holocaust affected him deeply: it was through a succession of personal encounters – together with the effect of Liberation Theology - that he was able to confront the actual realities. The late Michael Prior, Vincentian priest and liberation theologian, came to the situation from a combination of commitment to the Palestinian people, frequent visits to the West Bank, and a long practice of reading the Bible with a liberation exegesis. Yet the process of freeing himself from the dominant school of biblical thinking on the Israeli right to inhabit the “promised land” was not an easy one.

But, if the challenge for Christian theologians was to confront on the one hand, our own complicity in anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, (plus the legacy of colonialist history) and
Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank... I saw the Separation Wall... I saw the settlements... And words like apartheid and ethnic cleansing sprang to my mind.

Returning to the USA, my concerns about Israel increased in direct proportion to the pace of illegal settlement-building. Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank. Travelling in Israel and the Occupied Territories my defences against the reality of Israel’s crimes crumbled. I saw the Separation Wall - I knew it was not for defence. I saw the damage inflicted by the checkpoints on Palestinian life and on the souls and psyches of my Jewish cousins in uniform who were placed there. I saw the settlements. I heard about the vicious acts of ideological Jewish settlers. And words like apartheid and ethnic cleansing sprang to my mind, unbidden and undeniable. And what is more, I learned that 1948, what I had learned to call The War of Liberation was the Nakba - the ethnic cleansing of three quarters of a million Palestinians from their villages, cities and farms. And I knew that what I was witnessing in the present, the whole apparatus of occupation, was a continuation of that project of colonization and ethnic cleansing. It horrified me and it broke my heart. Most important of all, I met the Palestinian people, and recognized them, no - claimed them - as my sisters and brothers. That summer, 40 years after the creation of the state of Israel, I knew then that something was fundamentally wrong with the Zionist enterprise.

Failure to act in the face of the oppression of the Palestinians on the other hand, a crisis of faith and identity awaited those Jewish theologians who were prepared to confront the truth.

Here is the voice of Mark Braverman, cited in full because of its powerful calibre, prophetic and symbolic: “I am the grandson of a fifth-generation Palestinian Jew. My grandfather was the direct descendant of one of the great Hasidic Rabbis of Europe, a family that later settled in Jerusalem in the mid-19th century. I was born in the United States in 1948 - the year of the declaration of the state of Israel. As such, I was raised in an amalgam of Rabbinic Judaism and political Zionism. I was taught that a miracle - born of heroism and bravery - had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was not a mere historical event - it was redemption... All of Jewish history was a story of struggle, exile, oppression and slaughter that had culminated in a homeland, again, and at last. I first visited Israel as a boy of 17, and I fell in love with the young state. I was proud of the miracle of modern Israel - of what my people had done, creating this vibrant country out of the ashes of Auschwitz. My Israeli family - religious Jews - warmly embraced me. But even as I embraced them in return, I heard the racism in the way they talked about the Arabs - it was in the way that whites talked about black people in the pre-Civil Rights Philadelphia of my birth. I knew then that there was something fundamentally wrong with the Zionist project, but my love for the Land stayed strong. After college, I lived for a year on a kibbutz, ignoring the implications of the pre-1948 Palestinian houses still in use and the ancient olive trees standing in silent rows at the edges of its grounds. Returning to the USA, my concerns about Israel increased in direct proportion to the pace of illegal settlement-building. Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security. Then I went to the West Bank. Travelling in Israel and the Occupied Territories my defences against the reality of Israel’s crimes crumbled. I saw the Separation Wall - I knew it was not for defence. I saw the damage inflicted by the checkpoints on Palestinian life and on the souls and psyches of my Jewish cousins in uniform who were placed there. I saw the settlements. I heard about the vicious acts of ideological Jewish settlers. And words like apartheid and ethnic cleansing sprang to my mind, unbidden and undeniable. And what is more, I learned that 1948, what I had learned to call The War of Liberation was the Nakba - the ethnic cleansing of three quarters of a million Palestinians from their villages, cities and farms. And I knew that what I was witnessing in the present, the whole apparatus of occupation, was a continuation of that project of colonization and ethnic cleansing. It horrified me and it broke my heart. Most important of all, I met the Palestinian people, and recognized them, no - claimed them - as my sisters and brothers. That summer, 40 years after the creation of the state of Israel, I knew then that something was fundamentally wrong with the Zionist enterprise.

It was this discovery that first set him on the search for peace and to start an organisation called Committee for Peace in the Middle East. He continues to experience criticism and even personal attacks for his opposition to Zionist policies. Again it was experiencing the realities on the ground that were meant to be shaping political life in Israel: It was only when I began to ask about the origins of the kibbutz in the struggle against the Palestinian Arabs that I stumbled upon a terrible truth: the land on which I was working had been owned by Arabs who had been displaced by the Zionist enterprise.

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9 The latest incident has been an attack on his family home by right-wing Zionists, because of his befriending attitude to Senator Goldstone.
of ethical Judaism he, like many Jews who adopt a critical position towards Zionism, (for example, Norman Finkelstein) has endured continual persecution and ridicule.

Another Jewish scholar who changed perspective is the Harvard research scholar Sara Roy, (now an authority on Gaza) whose parents survived Buchenwald and Auschwitz. She went for research purposes to the West Bank and Gaza in 1985, and lived a summer that changed her life when she saw the humiliation of the Palestinian people and their treatment by the Israeli soldiers.11 It is perhaps in the concept of home and shelter that I find the most profound link between the Jews and Palestinians, and perhaps the most painful illustration of the meaning of occupation. For Jews as for Palestinians a house represents far more than a roof over one’s head: it represents life itself.12

A similar experience transformed Jeff Halper, educator and anthropologist, an American Zionist who fell in love with Israel. One fatal day (July 1998) he witnessed the destruction of his friend Salim Shawa naleh’s home: As the bulldozer pushed through the walls of Salim’s home, it pushed me through all the ideological rationalisations, the pretexts, the lies, and the bullshit that my country had erected to prevent us from seeing the truth: that oppression must accompany an attempt not only to deny the existence and claims of another people, but also to establish a Jewish state in the lands of the Arab/Palestinian.13

This devastating experience led him to found ICAHD, The Israeli Campaign against Housing Demolition. No account would be complete without mention of the emergence of the Israeli “revisionist” historians – including Ilan Pappé, Nur Masalha, Avi Schlaim and Benny Morris. What these historians share is that access to the historical archives has provided insight and historical testimony to Zionist aggression, especially to the truth of what happened in 1948. In their different ways they have made a great contribution to altering consciousness, often at great cost to their personal lives.14

3. The Influence of Liberation Theology

This is a crucial part of the story, and, as I will show, of significance to Jews, Christians and (increasingly) Muslims. If confronting the truth of what was happening on the ground was one great catalyst of change, Liberation Theology provided a powerful tool of analysis. Although it is usually thought that this had its roots in Latin America, and spread to other continents and other contexts, as Naim Ateek has pointed out, there cannot be one theology of liberation for Africa and another for Latin America - no black or women’s theologies of liberation - because all have been radically librated by Christ, and in Christ, all Christian are one.15

His own groundbreaking study is bibliically-based and this is the perspective taken by Professor Christopher Rowland, (mentioned earlier), who also came to the situation with considerable experience of Latin America: for years he chaired the Latin American desk of Christian Aid, whose reliance on a liberation theology analysis was drawn out in the eighties by a former director, Revd Michael Taylor.16 A development of Liberation theology has been the analogy between the apartheid struggle in South Africa and the worsening apartheid context of the West Bank and Gaza.

This is expressed notably by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, but also by Jim Wallis, (editor of Sojourners in the USA), Pax Christi, the Iona community in Scotland and many others.

Jewish theologian, Marc Ellis, (also mentioned earlier), was deeply influenced by Liberation Theology, both through his work with the Maryknoll missionaries and by his experience with the Catholic Worker movement, whose founder, Dorothy Day, was an inspiration to him. In his earlier work, Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation, he attempted to examine the Holocaust experience through the lens of Liberation Theology and to put it into a wider context: As Walter Benjamin correctly points out, the memory of our enslaved ancestors can either enslave us or set us free. Paradoxically the Exodus paradigm may be enlightening here. For the memories of past slavery may encourage a return to bondage in the guise of freedom ...Those who sought a return to Egypt were refusing the risk of the wilderness... Yet freedom lay elsewhere, beyond the known, and new patterns of life and worship were to be developed in the pain and struggle of liberation.17

This perspective is developed in a later work, Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power,18 where he is specifically influenced by Naim Ateek’s attempts to work for reconciliation, beyond revenge and destruction.19 In Practicing Exile,20 from his Nicaraguan experience, he draws on the motif of martyrdom, which - as I see it - in the contemporary Palestinian context can be interpreted as witnessing to the truth, or remaining steadfast, as the spirituality of sumud expresses it.

A more recent and promising development is the emergence of Islamic Liberation Theology. In his recent book, Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire, (Routledge 2008), Hamid Dabashi writes: What we are witnessing in much of the Muslim world today, as indeed in much of the world at large, is the rightful struggle of ordinary people for their pride of place, for social equanimity, economic justice, political participation, a legitimate and assertive place in the global redistribution of power.21

Drawing on the “foundering father” of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, he declares that “In the last instance ...we

12 Ibid., p.21.
14 Space does not permit a discussion of the views of the revisionist historians. For Ilan Pappé, see Interviews published on his website, www.ilanpappe.com. (Ilan Pappé is now Co Director of the Centre for Ethnic and Political studies at the University of Exeter, UK). Also Ilan Pappé, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, (Oxford: Oxfordworld 2006). It was Benny Morris who coined the phrase “the New Historians” and revealed the extent of the refugee situation in The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949 (He would later change his mind). Nur Masalha, also a historian/activist, is a Palestinian Muslim from The Galilee and a colleague of the late Revd Michael Prior and editor of Holy Land studies. He explains that his political baptism, beyond the known, and new patterns of life and worship were to be developed in the pain and struggle of liberation.21
15 Naim Stefan Ateek, Justice and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation, (Maryknoll, Orbis 1989).
16 Christian Aid is a Christian Development Agency, with its headquarters in London. Founded in the 1940s, it has campaigned against poverty and injustice for over 80 years, and, since the 1980s, for peace and justice in the middle East.
19 Ibid., pp 125-130
20 Practicing Exile, op cit, Chapter 7.
21 Hamid Dabashi, Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire, (Routledge 2008).
will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society and in the heart of the People of God, when they themselves 'account for the hope,' which they bear, when they are the protagonists of their own liberation." For that to happen, that hope will have to transcend its particular (Jewish, Christian, Islamic, or any other) denominational divide and speak a metaphysics of liberation beyond the theology of one or another divisive claim on God. This particularity of that theology will have to speak a universal language, from the bosom of its particularity.22

This stance has been further elaborated in a Palestinian context. In June 2005, at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, Dr Saeid Reza Ameli, an Iranian scholar and founder for the Institute of Islamic Studies, London, spoke of the universality of Liberation Theology. Building on the key concept that Liberation theology is an attempt to liberate people of the world from poverty and oppression, he traced its relevance for the Palestinian people in specifically Islamic categories.23 Its emergence is based on nostalgia for justice and for the sake of a broader view of humanity, the swelling chorus of voices knows that now is the time for justice and peace:

Conclusion: Kairos Palestine

Of course, despite the hopeful developments I have described here, the changed religious positions of the three faiths on their own will not achieve the longed-for peace. Many Israelis – if not most – operate from a secular basis. As Nur Masalha said, peace will be achieved on an international basis. Yet the broad, growing, international coalition of people of goodwill across the faiths

Even if the dominant theological position of contemporary Judaism has not reconciled itself to moving beyond victim consciousness, and both Matt. Ellis and Mark Beaverman still struggle to forge new meanings for covenant and “chosenness,” (both key characteristics of Jewish identity), yet there is movement in entrenched positions. Walter Brueggeman has shifted his views on Jewish entitlement to “the land.”24 Some theologians like the late Michael Prior reject the Biblical conquest narratives as untrue to a God of love. Others, like Christopher Rowland, appeal to the history of biblical interpretation, showing that there is no consistent tradition in taking these narratives seriously as the word of God.

What is indisputable is that this is the moment for Kairos Palestine. 'The document published in December 2009 has made an appeal that cannot be ignored. Whether we draw on the wellspring of revolutionary forgiveness, or Etty Hillesum's refusal to give way to hatred for the sake of a broader view of humanity, the swelling chorus of voices knows that now is the time for justice and peace:

Challenging by non-violent means a self-righteous ideological state that allows itself, aided by a mute world, to dispossess and destroy the indigenous people of Palestine, is a just and moral cause.25

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22 Ibid.
23 ‘The source for this section is the powerpoint presentation at this conference, 7897_universality_of_liberation_theology.
24 He cites the text: “So whoever expects to encounter his Lord, let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord (Surat Al-Kahf, Verses, 110).”25
26 Ran Pappé, cited in Mark Beaverman, ibid., p.274

STATEMENT OF FAITH

by Elizabeth Knott

A life of faith is a journey of discovering that the One behind the acts of creation is awesome, approachable and available valuing each human as irreplaceable

A life of faith is a journey of discovering creation's grandeur and minuscule elements of interconnectedness and interdependence within the whole universe and within each of us

A life of faith is a journey of discovering the width, depth and height of the Creator's extraordinary love made visible in Jesus who exemplifies compassion, humility, peace and justice

A life of faith is a journey of discovering and discerning the Spirit of Jesus and his call to us to follow him in ministering to and with our neighbor

A life of faith is a journey of discovering that each of us is unique and precious with gifts and talents to be identified and shared in creating a more just, benevolent and secure global village

A life of faith is a journey of discovering that failures bring the opportunity for new beginnings - a fresh start and forgiveness renews relationships

A life of faith is a journey of discovering gratefulness can become a frequent happening spontaneous, contagious, uplifting generating warmth and cause for reflecting, sharing and joy

A life of faith is a journey of discovering ultimately how to that - how to trust God and to live hope-fully and intentionally in pursuing justice on good days and days not so good!
About 150 women gathered at the Bethlehem Hotel from the Galilee, Jerusalem and the West Bank to engage in discussion and respond to expert speakers about the spiritual, legal, social and educational challenges that can empower women and reaffirm their responsibility and role in community-building and decision-making.

Glimpses of Our Activities

Nazareth Programs

Jerusalem Programs

The strong sentiments that influenced Dutch churches and theologians so deeply in their view on Israel and the Palestinians since World War II can be illustrated by a personal memory. One day in June 1967, as a 12-year-old boy I played football with classmates of the elementary school. On this day we cheered not only for our own goals, but also for the glorious victory of the Israeli army in the Six-Day War.

Such was the general mood in the Netherlands at the time: admiration for a small Jewish people and a young state which, after the horrors of the Holocaust, had triumphed over strong Arab enemies. Leon Uris’ book Exodus was read by many and became very influential among Dutch Christians in the general view concerning the struggle of the Jewish people in the holy land. In broad Christian circles, the firm belief reigned that this new Israel, whether its citizens were religious or not, was the same as the people of the covenant in the bible.

Warning remarks of the prophets and of apostle Paul that distinguish between Israel as the obedient people of God and Israel as ethnic entity were neglected. Instead, for many Dutch Christians the new state of Israel was a kind of realised eschatology representing concrete and visible proof for the truth of the bible read literally against all modern trends and doubts of secularisation. The kingdom of God became an irrefutable, visible reality in the state of Israel.

The fact, however, is that this glorious manifestation of God’s kingdom was realised through ethnic cleansing, the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinian Muslims and Christians, and the destruction of over 500 Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods. This was not known by the general public in the Netherlands, and the few who did know and tried to unveil this dark side to the ‘miracle of new Israel’ were ignored or denounced as anti-Semitic.

In the seventies, besides the enthusiasm for the new state of Israel, there grew in the Netherlands an inevitable consciousness of guilt and repentance resulting from the dark history of anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews in our church history and theology. This
generated intense reflection in the churches about the question of how the Holocaust was made possible in a Christian Europe, and how to adjust our own theological views to prevent such anti-Semitism in the future. This painful confrontation with anti-Semitism was still necessary, but did not develop enough to recognise also the western co-responsibility for the Nakba (the 'catastrophe') of the Palestinians in 1948. Especially in protestant churches, preoccupation with anti-Semitism strengthened the identification of 'Israel' as an ethnic identity rather than as a religious community, with the result that solidarity with Israel became a one-sided ethnic solidarity on theological grounds.

This identification became even more anchored after the United Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PCn) adopted the Church Order (2004), which claims the 'unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people' as a basic article of the Christian faith. The explanation of this article goes so far as to imply a necessity for special solidarity with the state of Israel, as an ethnic group among others – He had always revert to God's eternal promises, but they are only God's people within the promising and obliging perspective of His covenant.

The strong solidarity of the Dutch churches with Israel, also as an ethnic people, resulted in the practice of a dangerous double standard. Israel was not and still is not judged by universal human rights, international law and the resolutions of the United Nations in the same critical manner as Palestinians and the Arab countries are, and the support of our churches for the rights of the Palestinian people, so many times confirmed by UN resolutions, is still very weak. Besides deep-rooted religious sentiments, the practice of this double standard is motivated by the fear that churches will damage their fragile relations with Jewish communities and institutes.

In many respects this fear and the developments and practices it caused still dominate the policy and theology of the Dutch churches; however, some important changes have come to pass. I can introduce them through my personal history. In 1978 I became involved in supporting the human rights movement in Czechoslovakia which at that time was suffering under the communist regime. I organised lectures for Dutch philosophers and theologians in dissident circles of Prague including professor Theo de Boer, a specialist in the philosophy of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (living in France). Once, when I visited professor de Boer at home, his wife Jeanet de Boer - de Leeuw, who was a high-school French teacher, asked me: “Henri, you are so involved in human rights, do you know something about the Palestinians?” She then told me about her contacts with Palestine Christians in Ramallah (Jean Zaru, co-founder of Sabeel, among others). But that simple question was embarrassing for me, because I still held the distorted view in which the word ‘Palestinians’ sounded nearly the same as ‘terrorists.’

That unexpected question was the beginning of a long process of rethinking my view and theology on Israel and the Palestinians. Books by Naim Ateek (Justice and only justice) and Mitri Raheeb (I am a Palestinian Christian) were particularly elucidating. But the decisive wake-up call remained this woman whom I respected and who could speak from her own experiences with Palestinians. Later on, participating in Sabeel’s international conferences became very important for me and for many new ‘Friends of Sabeel’ in the Netherlands. Especially the excursions, in which we were confronted with the harsh reality of the Palestinian people and their personal stories, had a huge impact.

Over time, Sabeel has become an important (but also disputed) window to the Middle East conflict for many Dutch Christians. We feel obliged now to accept our Palestinian brothers and sisters as truthful guides in the history and reality of their people. After many years of ignorance about the Palestinian Christians, Sabeel is now well-known in our churches, especially through the good work of the Friends of Sabeel Netherlands and also Meta Floor, delegated by the PCn as a Dutch staff-member for Sabeel in Jerusalem. There is also a growing awareness in the PCn that its traditional ‘Israel-theology’ has to be accounted for and revised in an elaborate biblical theological document, which until now has not happened.

In 2008, partly under influence of church members who experienced the reality of the Palestinian people, the PCn (my own church) made a far-reaching change in church politics regarding Israel and the Palestinians. The synod officially stated that also in relation to the conflict in the Middle East the primary framework for judgment and church politics is international law, including the UN resolutions. Besides asking us to review our theological views on Israel, I think Sabeel should encourage the churches to apply international law as the principal standard for judging current conflicts. A church that does not respect international law, as with the case of the Palestinians, needs to publicly explain its position and be pressured to make changes.

Although international law is becoming more and more important for the Dutch churches, strong theological sentiments regarding Israel, which are distorted by immature feelings of guilt and unbiblical ethnic motives, still hold the upper hand in broad orthodox and evangelical circles, even among several Dutch church leaders. But public opinion, inside and outside the church, is changing – too slow and too late, but it is clearly changing. In this process our church leaders are not leading but hesitating followers, afraid of possible criticism of Jews and conflicts in their congregations.

Sabeel can help us all to encounter “the face of the Palestinian other,” which is as important as meeting the face of the Jewish other, and discover that every man, woman and child is a precious creature of God. As a result of such encounters, we are all obliged to develop and support a theology in which the equality of all people is anchored in Christian faith, and to support international law as a primary obligation for all, religious or not.

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The lack of peace in the state of Israel is due to a predominantly religious definition of the land as well as of the state of Israel itself. The state of Israel is caught up in an essential contradiction: it wants to be both a Jewish and a democratic state. The two definitions are incompatible. In a democratic state all citizens are equal before the law; they have the freedom of opinion, of conscience and of religion. No citizen is discriminated against because he or she belongs to a specific ethnic group, and international law is respected.

In Israel, 20% of the population are Palestinians, in many respects citizens with inferior rights. Only 15-20% of the population are Jews respecting the Jewish religious traditions, and yet it is defined as Jewish. It is a state that is built on discrimination.

As long as the state of Israel defines itself as a Jewish state, it needs religion as its legitimate existence. The religious parties have taken part in every coalition of Israel. The Palestinians’ human rights cannot be avoided as long as Palestinians insist on a partition of the land against God’s will. As a Jewish state, Israel has the intention of accepting only an exclusively Jewish population.

In spite of its legalization by UN Resolution 181 (Nov. 29, 1947), the state of Israel disregards all UN resolutions which require that it retire from the occupied areas and which prohibit settlements in those areas. Israel’s policy of settlements is against international law.

The theological part of this violation of the law is justified by biblical references, and the secular part is covered up by the right of self-defence proper to each state. This right of self-defence is questionable if “self-defence” means “defending” the violation of human and international rights and the consequences thereof.

In 1980, the Rhine-Synod (Rheinische Synode) declared that God’s covenant with His people, Israel, still exists. This was overdue. On the other hand, it is fatal that the Synod felt obliged to interpret the foundation of the state of Israel as a “sign of God’s loyalty” to His people. You cannot compensate a theology concerning Judaism, which for centuries had been wrong and which to a large extent paved the way to Auschwitz, by defining the State of Israel realized in disregard of international law as a sign of God’s loyalty. States are human institutions and therefore dictates of reason. It can only be fatal to give them the religious significance of “God’s work” or “sign of His loyalty.” People around the world are living in different states; if one interprets the state as God’s work, he/she claims God for a particular state.

To do this, to claim God for only a special group of people excluding other groups, is a serious mistake and means misunderstanding the one and only, the universal God who created all men and nations and wants to save them all.

The religiously defined state of Israel is due to the predominance of religious settlers. These traditionalists block the legitimate pursuits for peace. For them, a two-state solution means betraying the Torah and disregarding God’s command to take the whole land into possession. The Torah in their eyes is more important than human rights and international law. For them, the Palestinians’ human rights cannot be avoided as long as Palestinians insist on a partition of the land against God’s will. As a Jewish state, Israel has the intention of accepting only an exclusively Jewish population.

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The lack of peace in the state of Israel is due to a predominantly religious definition of the land as well as of the state of Israel itself. The state of Israel is caught up in an essential contradiction: it wants to be both a Jewish and a democratic state. The two definitions are incompatible. In a democratic state all citizens are equal before the law; they have the freedom of opinion, of conscience and of religion. No citizen is discriminated against because he or she belongs to a specific ethnic group, and international law is respected.

The lack of peace in the state of Israel is due to a predominantly religious definition of the land as well as of the state of Israel itself. The state of Israel is caught up in an essential contradiction: it wants to be both a Jewish and a democratic state. The two definitions are incompatible. In a democratic state all citizens are equal before the law; they have the freedom of opinion, of conscience and of religion. No citizen is discriminated against because he or she belongs to a specific ethnic group, and international law is respected.
the place where living according to God’s Torah is possible. The Torah becomes the
portative homeland of the Jews. Israel received its identity outside the
land through two gifts: one was His
Torah and the Torah at the Sinai, the
other gift was that during the exile God
revealed Himself as the one and only, the
universal God.

Where God’s justice and shalom is
proclaimed as His rule over all nations,
the Jewish diaspora has to stand up for
the right of existence of the state
of Israel, but must likewise stand up for
the Palestinians’ right of existence as well
as for a viable Palestinian state. As
far as theology is concerned, I consider
it absolutely essential that there is
neither a single gift of God nor one of
His commands that could justify the
expulsion or death of a single human
being. No specific country is holy, for the
whole earth is God’s earth. Every person
is holy to God because God created men
and women in His own image, both
Jews and non-Jews. The holiness and
the inviolable dignity of every person,
whether Jew or non-Jew, Israeli or
Palestinian Arab, whether belonging to
a religious group or not, is the yardstick
by which every other of God’s gifts to
mankind has to be measured.

Where the state of Israel violates human
rights and international law we must
speak out, especially because our
guilt towards the Jews – as Christians and
as Germans – is so immense. And we
must not be confused by the reproach
of anti-Semitism. He/she who honestly
cares for Israel will not stop reminding it
that the shalom of Israel’s God and our
God includes the Palestinians as well as
all nations.

Dr. Jochen Vollmer, born 1939, is a pastor
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SAEBEL EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2011
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Richard Horsley is the Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion at the University of
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Ched Myers is an "author, organizer and advocate who has for 30 years been challenging and
supporting Christians to engage in peace and justice work and radical discipleship."
John Dear is a Jesuit priest, pastor, peacemaker, organizer, lecturer, and retreat
leader and the author/editor of 25 books.

The Most Revd Thabo Makgoba is the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town and Metropolitan
of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa

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PURPOSE STATEMENT OF SABEEL

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word ‘Sabeel’ is Arabic for ‘the way’ and also a ‘channel’ or ‘spring’ of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on Friends of Sabeel groups in your area please contact our international representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.