

CORNERSTONE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION BY SABEEL ECUMENICAL LIBERATION THEOLOGY CENTER

THE CHANGING THEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

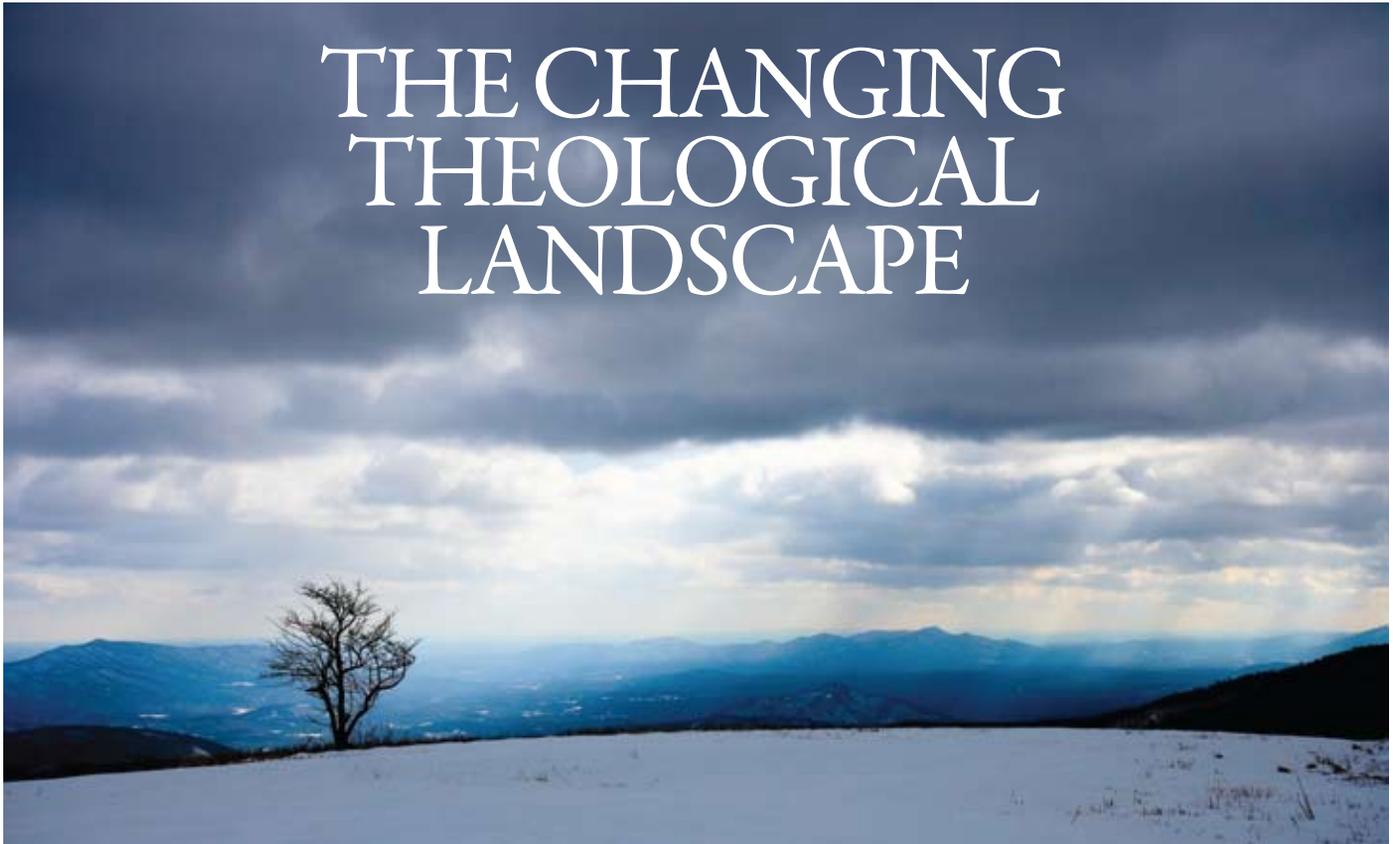


Photo by Leo Laub

At the Threshold of New Theological Thinking

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by Naim Ateek

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 anti-semitism 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 the dawning of liberation and redemption. If the Holocaust was the Jewish experience of death, the creation 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 in 1948.

The interfaith dialogue flung open a door that had been shut for centuries. German, Dutch, British, Canadian, American and other theologians championed the Zionist cause and became its greatest advocates. They discussed issues of history, theology, Bible, liturgy, attitudes, stereotypes, myths, and numerous other topics. They confronted, exposed, analyzed, and scrutinized the past.



photo by Hannah Carter

English/Korean Bible from participant of Sabeel Young Adult Conference.



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Everything that marred Christian-Jewish relations in the past was tackled. These Holocaust theologians authored books and published numerous articles. All the sins and crimes carried out against the Jewish people by Christians, Christianity, and the church were exposed and confessed.

In the light of the Holocaust, these dialogues were important and essential. However, they also led to what became known as “The Ecumenical Deal” where western Christian participants not only expressed remorse for past crimes, but also committed themselves to unflinching support of the Jewish people and pledged publicly or tacitly to stand by the state of Israel. The Jewish people were seen as the innocent victims and western Christians and their Christianity as the guilty culprits. It was, therefore, fitting that western Christians stand repentant of their guilt and walk penitently the

way of solidarity and support for both Jews and Israel.

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.

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.

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.

This coincided with the rise of Palestinian Liberation Theology, and the emergence of Jewish revisionist historians, as well as the writings of Palestinian and Western scholars who were already championing the just cause of the Palestinians. The number of such scholars around the world gradually increased to include people who were previously pro-Zionists in their leanings such as scholars from the UK, Germany, Holland, Sweden and others who have written extensively on themes of justice, peace, land, Christian Zionism, and others who wrote in support of justice for the Palestinians.

All these in turn forced theological thinking to change again. It drew attention to a more holistic way of doing theology, much healthier, and much more in line with our understanding of God. It helped us see God’s comprehensive love for all people. This replaced our narrow theological thinking that in actual fact created God in our own image and after our own prejudices. The Holocaust motto of “Never Again” that was used exclusively for the “the Jewish people” was expanded in its use to include “the

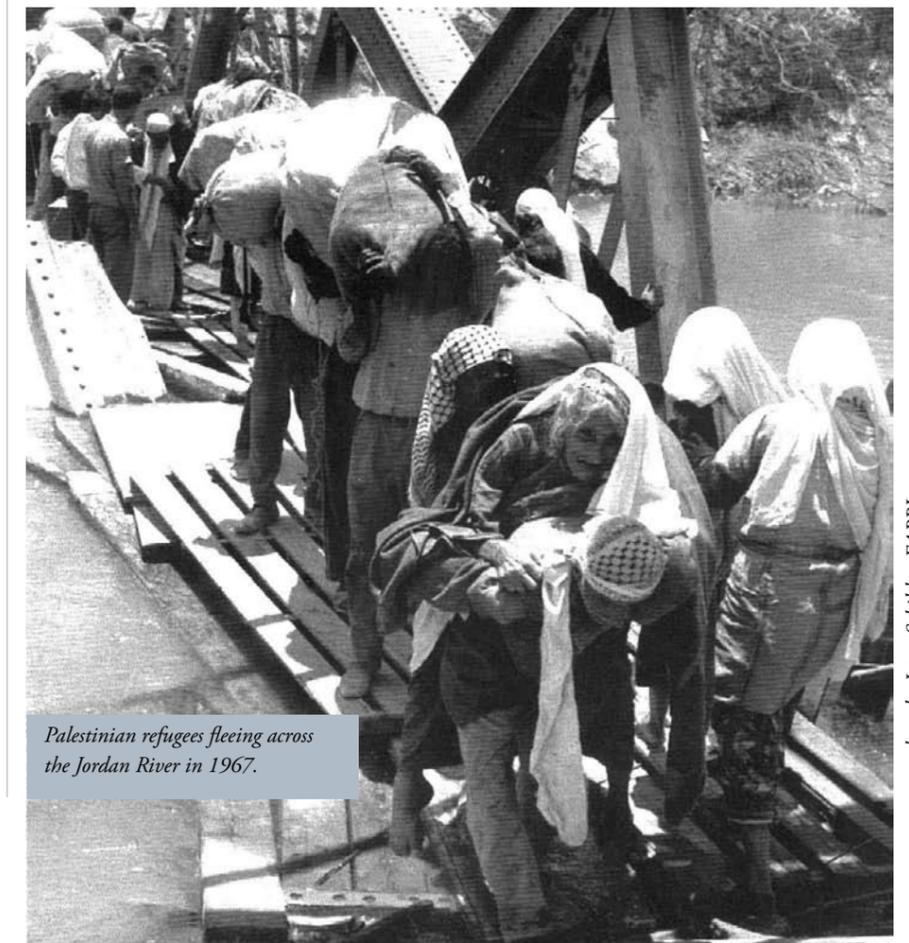
Palestinians and all oppressed people.” This issue of Cornerstone reflects the beginning of the radical revolution in theological thinking that started in the second part of the 20th century, first as a response to the Holocaust and later as a response to the Nakba and must continue to develop in order to respond to the growing Islamophobia. At every developing stage, theology will have to respond to the challenges of the hour. One of the expected changes that must

take place in the Christian church is a revised Lectionary for Christian worship. Texts that reflect the violence of god or an exclusive theology of god, land, and people must be removed and substituted by texts that express the inclusive love of God for all people. The important point is this: we cannot do theology today without taking serious consideration not only of the Holocaust, but of the Nakba as well. We are only standing at the threshold.

The Rev. Naim Ateek is the Director of Sabeel



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.



Palestinian refugees fleeing across the Jordan River in 1967.

photo by Jeppe Schilder, EAPPI.



Mark Braverman gives lecture to the Sabeel community in Jerusalem

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 theodicy 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 naively thought that the way forward for peace was to work with groups on both sides of the divide. So I joined Jewish-Christian dialogue groups and was, for a time, a member of the International Committee of Christians and Jews’ Theology Group. I thoroughly appreciated everything

I experienced with this group, but the crunch came at an International Conference in Kiev, 1997. Here I was asked to work on the Justice document for ICCJ with a Jewish Rabbi. When I asked how the document should handle the Palestinian question I was told, “Don’t mention it at all!” I immediately resigned from ICCJ.

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.¹ 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 Ruether’s foundational work, *Faith and Fratricide: the Theological Roots of anti-Semitism*.² It remains a key text. Creative explorations followed, such as Mary Boys’ *Has God only One Blessing? Judaism as source of Christian Self-Understanding*.³ 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.⁴

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 deafening 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 Ruether 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.⁵

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 Theology⁶ - 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

1 *Nostra Aetate*, Constitution of the Second Vatican Council.

2 R.R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, (New York: Crossroads 1974). This was followed in 1978 by Charlotte Klein’s *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology*, (Fortress 1978). The author was a Sister of Zion and this book would prove influential in changing the congregation’s mission.

3 Mary Boys, *Has God only One Blessing? Judaism as Source of Christian Self-Understanding*, (New York: Paulist Press 2000)

4 Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land*, (Austin, Texas: Synergy Books 2010), p.107.

5 Personal e-mail, April 7th, 2010.



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.

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 something was 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 my first encounter with the Land, I saw all that, and my relationship to Israel changed forever.⁷

A similar reaction is witnessed to by many Jewish thinkers and theologians, many the children of Holocaust survivors. The awakening of Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the liberal Jewish journal *Tikkun*, who had grown up in a Zionist household, visited often by David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, among others, was dramatic. When he was 22 years old he spent an extended time in a kibbutz in Israel. Though impressed, he was stunned by the lack of social ideals that



Village of Um Al Khayr, southeast of Hebron, and the Karmel settlement next-door.



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

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.⁸

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.⁹ Again it was experiencing the realities on the ground that

led Marc Ellis, perhaps the most prolific Jewish theological writer on Israel/Palestine, and an early pioneer in fashioning a Jewish Liberation theology which attempted to set the Holocaust in a broader context, which led him to commit himself to work for justice, to write: This injustice could not be tolerated. I could not be silent. But with what words would I express my dissent? Where would I find a voice?¹⁰

Ellis's stance of being inside and outside his own history at the same time is described as *practicing exile*. The Holocaust invaded every corner of his life/ Jewish life at this time: in his search for peace and reconciliation, and for fidelity to the highest traditions

⁸ Michael Lerner, *Healing Israel/Palestine: a Path to Peace and Reconciliation*, (Berkeley: tikkun Books, 2003), p.xiv.

⁹ The latest incident has been an attack on his family home by right-wing Zionists, because of his befriending attitude to Senator Goldstone.

¹⁰ Marc H.Ellis, *Practicing Exile: The Religious Odyssey of an American Jew*, (Augsburg Fortress 2002), p.14.

⁷ Mark Braverman, "Justice at the Gate", Lecture at FOSNA Conference 2009.

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 Shawamreh'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 to deny the existence and claims of another people in order to establish an ethnically pure state for yourself.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 given 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 made clear, 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 liberated by Christ, and in Christ, all Christian are one.¹⁵

His own groundbreaking study is biblically-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.



Sabeel Nazareth young adults visit Mt. Tabor, Mt. of Transfiguration

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, *Towards 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 "founding father" of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, he declares that "In the last instance ... we

11 Sara Roy, *Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, (London: Pluto 2007), pp 19-21.

12 Ibid., p.21.

13 Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel*, (London: Pluto 2008), p.15.

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: Oneworld 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 own views have evolved over the years. He is more interested in the role of theology and religion in the Israel-Palestine conflict, although beginning his "political baptism" with secular activism.

15 Naim Stifan 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.

17 Mark Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, (London: SCM 1987), p. 121.

18 Marc Ellis, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1990).

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. The 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 Saied 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 nostalgia for metaphysical values. Three elements are required: the first is, return to God that will affect practices on the earth about self and others.²⁴ Selflessness is the second element: Selflessness, minimization of personal desires and dogmatic attachments to nationality, ethnicity and even religion are major requirements for caring for oppressed and poor people. This means avoiding all things which can be considered as 'selfishness'. 'Self' here is not only a person, but it can cover all 'collective centralities' such as Eurocentrism, Americentrism and Zionism, which cause demolishing and destruction of 'others' for the price of supporting the

'self'. Furthermore, "Selflessness is a divine and mystical soul of all divine religions which brings God's spirit to all aspects of life... Here is where the Palestinian problem becomes a global issue for all human beings who care about 'others', here is the position at which 'all become equal to one and one becomes equal to all,' where unity within diversity and diversity within unity can be observed. The third point - common to all liberation theologies - is the centrality of Justice. As regards Palestine, the relevance is that the "Chosen society is the oppressed society." As the Prophet Mohammad said: "Shall I let you know about the kings of the Heaven? Every powerless deprived". In Islam, he continues, the future is not in the hands of those who kept the powerless deprived. It is articulated that: "And We desired to show favour to those who were deprived in the land, and to make them Imams, and to make them the inheritors."

This has a remarkable resonance with the Christian hope from the Sermon on the Mount that "the meek will inherit the earth:" the fact that this liberation thinking is emerging from Islam is itself an enormous source of hope.

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 can certainly be influenced by changing theological coherence across the faiths.

Even if the dominant theological position of contemporary Judaism has not reconciled itself to moving beyond victim consciousness, and both Marc Ellis and Mark Braverman 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".²⁵ 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.²⁶

25 See Mark Braverman, *Fatal Embrace*, (Austin, Texas: Synergy Books 2010), Introduction, p.5

26 Ilan Pappé, cited in Mark Braverman, *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 miniscule 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 recreates 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 float - how to trust God and to live hope-fully and intentionally in pursuing justice on good days and days not so good!

Elizabeth Knott recently received the Women of Faith Award, given by the Presbyterian Church USA for her lifelong work for peace and justice and her deep Christian faith. To her, "A life of faith is a journey of discovering ultimately how to float-how to trust God, live hopefully, and pursue justice intentionally, on good days and days not so good!"

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)."

Glimpses of Our Activities

NAZARETH PROGRAMS



Kids Summer Camp



Women Joint Trip to Golan heights, Banyas and Majdal Shams



Young Adult Conference participants clearing fields at the Tent of Nations



Naji Farah's Book Launch



Participants in the 5th Annual Sabeel Young Adult Conference standing with the Women in Black in Haifa

JERUSALEM PROGRAMS



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.



Participants from the conference dance at the Orient Restaurant in Beit Sahour. The conference ran from August 26th-28th.

Kingdom and Nakba

Dutch Christians on Israel and the Palestinians

Picture: Palestine Monitor



A young Palestinian boy stands on the outskirts of Um al Khayr with his back to the Karmel settlement.

by: Henri Veldhuis

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 and still is 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 essential element of the Jewish consciousness.

Here we see the crucial theological failure of the Israel-theology in the Dutch churches that has dominated for so many years. It is true, the electing God makes a new start with Abraham and his children, and in the historical order of salvation

it is ‘first the Jew, then the Greek’ (St. Paul). But the covenant, having its base in the electing God, is two sided: God started his election with one particular ethnic group among others – He had to start somewhere – but that doesn’t mean this people has any priority over other people on ethnic (Jewish) grounds. For only insofar as the (ethnic) children of Abraham are faithful to God within the promises and commandments of the covenant are they truly spiritual children of Abraham. This crucial distinction is made again and again by the prophets, and repeated by St. Paul in a fundamental way in Romans 9: 7-9 (and not revoked in ch. 10 or 11). Jews, as ethnic children of Abraham, can 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



Israeli attacks on Gaza

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 brethren and sisters as trustful 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

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 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



The sun rises over the Jordan Valley.

photo by Jeppe Schilder, EAPPI

ISRAEL: The Land and the State

A Theological Criticism

By Jochen Vollmer | Translated by Gisela Dehlinger

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 for its legitimate existence. The religious parties have taken part in every coalition government since 1967. They consider themselves advocates of the biblical

traditions, of the claim to "Greater Israel." They represent the 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, violating 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 Jewish nation as an ethnic entity existing since biblical times in uninterrupted continuity is a myth. From the time of its exile in Babylon until today the Jewish nation has been spreading throughout the diaspora. Many people converted to Judaism. Jewry consists of people from many nations; members of German Jewry for example define themselves as Germans adhering to the Jewish religion. Two thirds of Jewry are living outside Israel.

The biblical promise of the land has its origin in the patriarchs' traditions in the Book of Genesis, in the

Book of Deuteronomy and in the Deuteronomistic History Books. But historically, the process of taking over the land was very different from the cruel and violent traditions in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua with God's mandate for genocide. These traditions are blasphemy. The appropriation of the land was a gradual infiltration of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups into the cultivated land, accompanied by social revolts of underprivileged groups living in the land. The conquest of the land as told in the Book of Joshua belongs to the category of national epics, of fiction and fantasy. The catastrophe of the exile with the loss of the land forced the Jews in Israel to reconsider their faith. The theology of the Jerusalem court associating throne and altar had failed. The amazing and remarkable thing is that during the exile Israel did not change sides to adhere to the gods of the much more powerful Babylon, quite the contrary. Israel held on to its God and testified that He is now the one and only God of all nations and the creator of heaven and earth.

During the exile, monotheism developed in Israel. The small group of Juda/Israel, during the exile under Babylonian and afterwards Persian rule, claimed that its God was the one and only God, the God of all nations and the creator of the universe. After all, God had not abandoned Israel. Israel was to go forward with its God, the one and only God, to a new future.

The belief in a chosen people and the hope of return to the land intensified to the degree that Jews found their theological expression in God's promise of the land, which He affirmed upon His oath to the patriarchs. Today, Old Testament scholars tend to date the biblical accounts about the patriarchs no earlier than the exile. Abraham set out from Babylon.

Not only did the belief in the promise of the land develop during the exile, but also the belief in His universal rule of justice over the whole world (Ps. 96-99). In the group of the Second Isaiah, Israel's election takes on a new meaning: Israel is called to testify for all nations that God's truth and justice prevail even to the end of the world. Israel's election was now interpreted in favour of the nations. The figure of the Lord's Suffering Servant shows that in Israel, there was now a readiness to testify to God's truth, in a non-violent way and in suffering.

During the exile, Israel learned that God can also be worshipped far from the land, that the exile is not a godless place. Not all of those who were exiled returned home after Cyrus' decree. Since the time of the exile, Jews have been living in the diaspora. The land is not for all Jews an indispensable part of their faith. The belief in God's universal rule means the whole earth. If "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24), then the world as a whole becomes

the place where living according to God's Torah is possible. The Torah becomes the portable homeland of the Jews.

Israel received its identity outside the land through two gifts: one was His covenant 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, there God cannot be claimed any more for Israel's particular salvation at the expense of the other nations, but only for Israel and the other nations. The salvation which God will create encompasses Israel as well as all the other nations. In this way, the Jewish diaspora is a witness for God's universality. But the Jewish right refers to the Torah at the expense of the other nations and does not take into consideration the

universal traditions of the Hebrew Bible. As a result, the different peace groups in Israel who struggle for the Palestinians' right of existence and a viable Palestinian State are seen as traitors.

Anyone who considers himself a true friend of Israel cannot one-sidedly 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 the pastor of the Lutheran Church of Wuerttemberg, Germany and author of various articles, most recently "We believe in the God of Peace. Basic Elements for a Catechism."



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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 *f* 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.