With gratitude and thanksgiving to God, we have arrived safely in Bethlehem and there is room in the Inn for all of us. You are our modern magi who have come anxiously to search for peace and well-being of the children of God who live in this land. You have come to stand with us, your sisters and brothers, in Palestine. We are here to bear witness to the importance of peace that needs to be based on truth and justice. On behalf of the Sabeel Board, General Assembly, and
I am only introducing this menacing phenomenon. Who is a religious extremist? A religious extremist is a person who holds extreme, fanatical religious views, especially one who resorts to, or advocates extreme action. Our three monotheistic religions, in various ways, are in a crisis regarding this phenomenon. Religion is supposed to lead us closer to the one God and closer to each other. Yet religion has become a problem. We are supposed to believe in the God of love and compassion, the God of justice and truth, the God of forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet we find ourselves very far from this God. Religion and our worship of God are supposed to make us more human and accepting of one another. Yet religious extremists, due to their beliefs and behaviors, are making a mockery of God. They have contaminated and polluted their religion. By so doing, they are dehumanizing us and dehumanizing themselves. A case in point is what has been happening in al-Arish in Egypt lately, where Coptic Christians were harassed and killed by Muslim religious extremists. The Egyptian government needs to do more to put an end to such criminal actions. They dictate government policies that are extremely vicious against the Palestinians. The Palestinians have little recourse to the rule of law. By and large, the Israeli courts and the judges are in the service of the settlers and most of the verdicts are in their favor. The extremist settlers have a free hand and they seem to be unstoppable. They are motivated and inspired by their religious sacred books, not only the Torah but also the Talmud and the Halakha. These extremist settlers begin with a major premise that God gave all of the land of Palestine to Jews and that the Arabs/Palestinians living on the land are thieves. This is what they believe. Therefore, they must liberate the land. When they build settlements, they do not believe that they are confiscating Palestinian land. For them, it is not an act of stealing, as the Palestinians and the international community say it is; they believe they are redeeming and sanctifying the land. They believe they are transferring the land from the satanic to the divine sphere, and that the use of force is permitted wherever and whenever necessary. They believe they are doing God’s work. They believe that God is with them whenever, in his name, they kill Palestinians. There are many Israeli Jewish settlers. There are many American Jewish settlers (as well as Jews of other countries) who are disturbed about what is happening. Some are speaking out against these extremists but the majority of Israeli Jews are silent. Frankly speaking, I see many similarities between extremist Muslims like Da’ish/ISIS and Jewish religious settlers. They both have the same mindset and both share similar racist religious laws.

Western Christian extremists: Christian extremism expresses itself, to a large extent, in Christian Zionist ideology that usually has been translated into political decisions and actions. It continues to have dire consequences on the life and future of our Palestinian people – the indigenous people of this land. In fact, western Christian Zionists must share the responsibility for the creation of Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel. One of the closest friends of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, was an Anglican priest by the name of William Hechler. Rev. Hechler was instrumental in inspiring and educating Herzl on those passages of the Bible that, he believed, call for the return of Jews to Palestine in fulfillment of prophecy. There are western Christians who are sympathetic to the Palestinians but still believe that the land of Palestine was given by God to the Jewish people. Do they support us because they feel sorry for us? The biblical texts they use reflect a tribal and exclusive understanding of God that has...
Jesus defines religious extremism: Before in my study of the gospels, I have always felt that the best definition of religious extremism and fundamentalism was given by Jesus Christ himself. According to the Gospel of John 16:1-3, Jesus said, “I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.” The words in John’s Gospel reflect the negative friction and struggle between the Jewish and the Christian communities at the end of the first century. The recorded words of Jesus were a great encouragement to the believers during their persecution. In effect Jesus is saying: you will be persecuted and even killed by religious people who think that by killing you, they are doing God’s will. Sadly, this still reflects the situation of some Christian communities in the Middle East.

Saul of Tarsus - a religious extremist: A case in point, in the book of Acts, is the story of Saul of Tarsus who later became Paul. In today’s language, Saul was a religious extremist. Out of his religious zeal, he was rounding up and persecuting the followers of Jesus (Acts 9). Saul approved of the stoning to death of Stephen, one of the young Christian converts (Acts 7:54, 58: 8:1). The story of Saul, the religious extremist, and his conversion is part of Christian history.

Certainly, our three religions can share stories about how their adherents were persecuted at the hands of extremists of another religion. Oftentimes, some of the worst religious persecutions happened from within the same religion. The hostilities within the same religion can oftentimes exceed the enmities from outside. As examples, one can point to wars between Catholics and Protestants within Christianity; Sunnis and Shias within Islam; Haredim and mainline Jews within Judaism. From one perspective, religious extremists have different religious labels but they share the same basic mentality and mindset. We need to recognize that our religious histories are full of crimes committed against each other, and tragically, western Christians bear some responsibility for atrocities against other religions. The most striking examples are the Crusades and western Christian anti-Semitism. The basic truth is that none of us is innocent. All of us have sinned against God and neighbor. We need to stand before God in humility and repentance. When I reflect on religious extremism, I wonder about the criteria that lead to religious extremism, the result of faulty interpretations of religious sacred texts, or in the content and substance of those texts? In other words, does the problem lie in religious faith? Does the problem lie in religious home and was taught to religious people in a violent god they find in their scriptures or is it in their blindness and unwillingness to see God as merciful and compassionate who requires us to do justice and to live in peace with one another? Finally, what are the antidotes to the malaise of religious extremism? I would like to suggest two quotations that can help us measure our religion, beliefs, faith, and behavior.

First: After his conversion, Saul of Tarsus became known as Paul. In his letter to the Church at Corinth he wrote: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body (to be burned) so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Secondly, Jesus Christ is the source. He has given us the antidote of love for healing our religious extremism: You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? … (Matt 5: 43-46).

The antidote to the malaise of religious extremism is love. It is left to us to translate love into a strategy of action that can work in each of our various cultures. Brothers and sisters, this conference is a wakeup call. It presents us with a challenge. Take a good look at your religion and measure it against the demand of love of God and love of your neighbor. Amen.

The Rev. Naim Ateek is the co-founder of Sabeel, Jerusalem and currently serves as Chairperson of the Sabeel Board.
The Balfour Declaration: Historical Context

by Dr. Peter A. Shambrook

In 1914, Great Britain was still the world's most powerful empire. Over a period of 500 years or so, through exploration, trade and settlement, treaties and the sword, missionaries, slavery, massacres, and ethnic cleansing, Britain colonised Ireland, part of the Americas, parts of Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and much more. During the 18th and 19th centuries, negotiating with allies concerned the control and division of unexplored territories, or the provinces of potential enemies was normal empire policy:

"Empires impose, empires dispose, according to their interests. In 1914, the (mostly) Oxford and Cambridge male oligarchy who ran Britain and the Empire harboured no doubts about the superiority of British civilisation: maintenance of the British Empire and maintenance of civilisation were synonymous.

Britain was a key player in the Triple Entente, so as soon as the Ottoman Empire entered the war in November 1914, the Russian, French and British governments immediately began intense, secret discussions concerning the post-war division of the whole of the Ottoman Empire, including the Arab provinces. Standard empire policy.

In August 1914, the British government had little, if any, desire whatsoever, to promote either Arab nationalism or Jewish nationalism.

So why did the British Government offer an independent Arab state including Palestine to Sherif Hussein in October 1915, if the latter would launch a revolt against the Turks in June 1916, the Sherif and his men duly started to attack Ottoman forces. The British regarded the letters between the two men as if written on a sheet of water.

In November 1914, French civil servant Georges Picot had arrived in London, and negotiated, with Sir Mark Sykes, a mutually acceptable post-war partition of Arab lands: an outrageous example of double-dealing, imperial perfidy, according to George Antonius, but an essential exercise according to the British and French governments, now allies, but whose past rivalries over the region had nearly led them to war. Unable to agree over Palestine, Sykes and Picot painted it blue on their map, and proposed it be governed by an 'international administration' (May 1916).

What then caused the British government in 1917 to turn to the Zionist movement? The tide of war had not yet turned in the Allies' favour. Apart from the ever present 'Suez Canal', Empire security factor, the British government hoped that Russian Jews and the Jews of the USA would become the agents of pro-British propaganda, to aid the war effort. Secondly, diplomatic reports underlined that both the French and the Germans were interested in supporting the Zionist movement for their own colonial ambitions — this encouraged the British not to be outmanoeuvred. Finally, Balfour, Lord Milner and Lloyd George had brought up the Old Testament as well the New, although agnostic in reality — felt sympathetic towards the idea of the 'return' of the Jews to their homeland. Such sympathy grew out of the influence of Christian Zionism, teaching which had strongly affected some of the British church and political establishment during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout April, May, and June 1917, successive Zionist drafts were sent to the cabinet office. The only Jew in the cabinet, Edwin Montagu, was the most outspoken opponent of the Declaration, together with Lord George Curzon — both of them, eventually, outmanoeuvred. Never was a declaration more carefully crafted. Its chief characteristic: deliberate ambiguity. The final draft explicitly recognised the legitimacy of Jewish national rights in Palestine, and implicitly denied Arab national rights in Palestine, although the Arabs constituted some 92% of the indigenous population. Thus, Zionism was transformed overnight from a small, militarily powerless movement into an internationally recognised project: the dream became a possibility.

Chaim Weizmann played a key role in this saga. He met Churchill first in 1905, Balfour in 1906, and Lloyd George in 1914. In fact, he met with Prime Minister Lloyd George seven times during the war, and by his own account had 2,000 meetings with British officials at the highest level during this decisive period. Between 1905 and 1948, there was no Palestinian equivalent of Weizmann in the corridors of power of London, Washington or Paris. Moreover, it is vital to understand the mentality of these decision-makers, both of the Zionists (seeking safety, security, and a Jewish national home, following many centuries of Western Christian persecution, especially the late 19th century pogroms) and of the British. Empires impose, empires dispose, according to their interests. In 1915, most government ministers regarded Arabs as politically and militarily insignificant, and economically, culturally, and theologically backward. Such orientalist attitudes were mirrored by Weizmann and his fellow European and American Zionist colleagues, and were undoubtedly a factor in the policies of the British Foreign Office in the years leading up to the First World War.

Although Balfour signed the letter, it was Churchill, as Colonial Secretary (1921-22), who successfully implemented and transformed the Declaration into the Mandate document of 24 July 1922. Henceforth, the cornerstone of British Mandatory policy in Palestine was (unlike Egypt and Iraq) the unpublicised, deliberate withholding of democratic political institutions. Ironically, both Wālīd Khalīlī and Sir Martin Gilbert agree on the centrality of this decisive denial policy, but disagree over its morality. Three significant key policies which emanated directly from the Declaration were the establishment of the Zionist Commission, the encouragement of Jewish immigration, and Jewish land purchase.

If there is one particular word which characterises a century of British policy towards the Arabs of Palestine, it is deception. Three brief examples: the Government publicised the Declaration as emanating exclusively from the War Cabinet. In fact, it was a two-party agreement. Secondly, during the 1920 British governments repeatedly denied any intention to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.

In fact, the state archives reveal the exact opposite. Thirdly, for the past century no British government has ever acknowledged that in October 1915 Sir Henry McMahon promised Palestine to Sherif Hussein. Thus it was that a 18th century-style colonial document, written by a 19th century-minded Europeans during the 20th century's 'Great War for Civilisation', and subsequently implemented by military force for three decades, sowed the seeds of the apparently endless, and certainly devastating, one hundred-year war for Palestine.

Dr. Peter Shambrook is the author of French Imperialism in Syria, 1927-1936 (Ithaca Press, 1998) and is the Historical Consultant to the Balfour Project (www.balfourproject.org).
Introduction

Over the last decade, the role of religion in conflicts of varying types has become a subject of increasingly prominent discourse, whether seen as a primary or a contributory cause of such conflicts. However true that may be in some situations, it needs careful examination as a factor in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is understandable that such a view has become prevalent for territory on which to build such a state. It is well known that the Zionists considered various options, including Argentina, Uganda and Australia. They finally decided on Palestine because of its historical, religious and emotional associations for many Jews. As such, Palestine had an appeal for European Jews for many Jews. as such, Palestine had an appeal for European Jews. In the 1880s, had co-existed with the Muslim majority of these Jews were devout. in 1880, had co-existed with the Muslim majority of these Jews were devout. the majority of the land, were able to acquire 78% of it through war. In the war of 1967, Israel enlarged its acquisition of Palestine by seizing the rest of it, a situation which has held to this day. The pattern of Israeli control was always the same: to acquire Palestinian land, to settle it with Jews and to consolidate the Jewish presence in a variety of ways. This current situation is one of ongoing Israeli colonisation in the territories occupied since 1967, but also in the parts of the country previously taken in 1948. One of the most important ways to do this was to keep the cleared Palestinians out of their land. In the wake of the 1948 war, Palestinian farmers who tried to get back to their farmlands were shot dead, and brutal reprisals against the Arab countries which hosted them were mounted to deter any more ‘infiltration’. The people evicted from their land in 1948 and who went on to become refugees and exiles have been steadfastly denied the right to return ever since then. In these ways, Israel succeeded in taking over the whole of Palestine, although it was not able to expel its entire people. This whole history attests to the immutable fact that the struggle was over the ownership of land from the beginning and until today.

The Palestinian response was likewise related to this question. Resistance had been mounted against the Zionists throughout the period from 1920 until 1948. Yet it was quite unable to halt the Zionist advance, or to prevent the mass eviction of Palestinians that took place before and after 1948. When, in 1964, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation was set up, it was a movement devoted to regaining the lost homeland. The leadership of the PLO and many of its fighters were secular and saw their struggle as such. This does not mean that they had no religious feeling. On the contrary, most PLO members and Palestinians, as a whole, were Muslims, some devout and many practised the rituals of Islam. But the PLO’s ideology was not religious, and it can only be described as an essentially secular response to Zionism.

Religious Zionism

After the 1967 war, religiously motivated Jewish settlers began to colonise the newly acquired Palestinian territories. Although...
the Israeli government remained as secular as before, it used the fervour of these settlers to expand its colonialist enterprise. Soon, Gush Emunim, (Block of the faithful) was founded in 1974, it belonged exclusively to the Jews, and no part of it can be given up. Over time, Gush Emunim and several other orthodox groups have come to dominate Israeli policy over the occupied territories. These groups represent a Jewish fundamentalism akin to that of some American Protestants. They all believe in the coming of the Messiah, although the role assigned to the Jews in this process is different. Amongst their number, the extremist rabbi, Meir Kahane, became a prominent figure who espoused the expulsion of all Arabs from the Land of Israel. These movements were strengthened by the election of a Likud government in 1977 and the appointment of Ariel Sharon as infrastructure minister. The settlement project developed massively under this government, and the religious fundamentalists flourished. Although the Jewish presence in the West Bank looked religious, and no doubt many of the settlers were fundamentalists, the project was still concerned primarily with the acquisition of land. Nevertheless, Jewish religious fundamentalism has increased in the last two decades, and shows no sign of abating. With time, these religious settlers have increased in numbers and strength, and their role in affecting Israeli state policy is growing.

Palestinian Islamism – Development and Timeline


Israel-funded. Israel gave Majamama’ charitable status 1978. Internal fighting with CRC. Took over Islamic university in 1978. Education important to spread Islam. Israel helped Majamama to expel nationalists from university board, and stood aside during episodes of strife. Israel supplied weapons. Regular meetings with Ahmad Yassin etc. 1984 – Ahmad Yassin arrested.

Islamic Jihad

Founded 1986. Gaza. Small. To end Israeli rule. Split off from Muslim Brotherhood and Majamama’ because not antioccupation enough. Inspired by and supports Iranian revolution—this showed that mighty rulers could be toppled. And so, Israel could be too. Majamama’ stopped supporting Iran because of Saudi Arabia. Debate over Iran.

2. West Bank

Muslim Brotherhood strong here. But nationalist strong here too. Secularism strong, Islamists viewed as reactionary. Except rural areas and Hebron. PLO decline after 1982 meant Islamists gained more of a foothold. Even joined PFLP against Fateh. Najah University, an Islamist stronghold. 1986 Islamist bloc formed here.Used violence to get their ends, Israel interfered on their
I've been asked to talk about Jewish extremism, but I think first we must think about what we mean by “Jewish,” and what we mean by “extremism.” If we start with “Jewish,” obviously there are a lot of definitions that go along with that term. It's important to understand, at least in the context that I come from in Israeli Jewish society, “Jewish” is not just a religion. If you look at Israeli ID cards, under the Nationality clause, it would say “Jewish.” And even though they've changed that now, and the ID doesn't say that anymore, the registry of the Ministry of the Interior classifies your nationality as Jewish, not just your religion. And when I talk about or think about Jewish extremism in this context, I think it's important to put it in the scope of nationalism and not just looking at a religion.

So, that's how I'm going to treat the question of “Jewish,” And the issue of “extremism” is obviously a very relative term. When we think about extremists, we think about the fringe of society. If you think about Jewish extremism, you might picture what we call the “hilltop youth,” the settler movement youth who go up to the hilltops in the West Bank, who start outposts and who are very violent towards Palestinians on a very physical level. We have that image of extremism. But what I would like to talk about is what happens when the mainstream opinion is extreme. Extremism doesn't necessarily have to be the fringe, although that's what the word implies, but today, if you look at Israeli politics, the entire spectrum of it should be considered as extreme. I think we make a mistake if we differentiate the extremists from the mainstream establishment. If we just take examples from the last week (and there's always examples from “last week,” no matter when you are speaking), we had this Bill, the amendment to the Entry to Israel Law, the 27th amendment, some of you might have heard of it, it forces the Ministry of the Interior to not give permits or visas to people who support a boycott or are part of a boycott. So, even if you just committed to participate in one, and the definition of boycott is a boycott of Israel or any of its institutions or any territory that it holds (I wonder what they mean by that definition?). It's a very general law that will affect a lot of the people here, but for me, what is interesting is seeing who pushed that forward. Does anyone know who the main person or party was who put that forward? Any guesses? It came out from Kulanu which is seen in Israel as a “center” party. It came out of Likud but also has some Labor people in it. It's seen as a center party and these are the people who brought up this bill. And the language around it says that you can have national pride and still believe in human rights. That's part of the explanation of that bill. And I have no idea what the connection is between that sentence and that bill, but it's important to understand that mainstream extremism is mainstream. Let me try to explain how that is constructed, especially for my generation. I was ten years old when Camp David ended, so very little that happened before that really affected my life or my politics, and obviously people younger than me, even more so. That's not part of our experience. I'm training to be a teacher and teach in a school in south Jerusalem. A lot of the time we teach and part of the time we observe, so we see other teachers. I was observing a class of ninth graders, fourteen or fifteen year old kids, and the teacher was trying to explain the difference between right and left in Israel. So, what she did was go around the class of 19 students and ask them if they were right wing or left wing and why. And out of 19 students, 19 said they were right wing (that was not really a question). Seventeen out of 19 said that the reason they were right wing was because they hated Arabs. This is a random class in a school in Jerusalem. This is not the extreme of anything. That is, right now, the way that these people are brought up, and it's important to remember that we're talking about fourteen, fifteen year old kids. I don't know about you, but I can't blame them for that. That's not their responsibility, but those are the responses coming out of them. That said, in three years, they will be with an M16 assault rifle standing at checkpoints. We can talk about the education system and whose responsibility but these things have very clear consequences. So, if I'm trying to explain how I see some of this extremism I have something to say about this last generation, this post Camp David generation. There are two main things to say about us. The first is that we actually have no hope. Nobody has ever presented an alternative to us in our lifetime that you can seriously look at as a possibility for something different. Nobody has had a serious negotiation since Camp David; there's nothing on the table; nobody's offering anything. So, the idea for us, the only reality that we are presented with is maintaining the status quo. And this is true for Palestinians and Israelis. We have not had a serious alternative presented.

The other thing that is worth noticing is that the segregation between the two societies has increased in those years; the checkpoint system started in the mid-90s, the wall in the beginning of the 2000s. So, the segregation has very much increased and it's had its affect. We like being nostalgic about the period before that, and I think not being there makes it easy to be nostalgic, but there's also a danger in that because if I really try to think about the core values that create the class that I walked into the other day, and create the hatred around this, they started long before the Camp David accords failed. My father grew up in that same mindset and that is a mindset that is based on the idea that the whole state, the whole society around us is created on the basic idea that Jews need a place to live in order to protect ourselves. It's based on a very fundamental place of fear. That's where our society comes from. And the solution offered to that fear is a “state.” We say that to protect the Jews we have to create an Israeli state, but what we mean
by that is that we have to create an Israeli military. We don’t say that but what we’re actually saying is that the Jews need a military to protect themselves and that the state is a mechanism in which you create a military. And those two things; the fundamental fear that we come from and our response to that, which is the military, are fundamental for the state, for Israeli Jewish society and, I think, create the extremism that we live in now. Because if the idea is that we really believe, and if this is how we are raised, that everyone is trying to kill us, and I go outside and people are trying to kill you. And it fits into that narrative, and I think that one of the most dangerous things that that creates, is that when it fits into the narrative of what’s been happening for three thousand years, then you don’t have to ask the question “why?”

If you go back to October 2015, two girls aged 14 and 16 from Hebron, Palestinian girls, who came into the market in Jerusalem, and possibly tried to stab people with scissors and were shot dead. As a society, I would like us to ask, “What would make a young teenage girl do that?” That should be the first question asked, but if you have an answer that that has been the reality for three thousand years and that’s just how things are, then you don’t ask that question. And that means that we don’t see any alternatives to living by our sword, and if these kids in that school, about three or four hours after that class, hear that a Palestinian in a truck ran over a group of soldiers at a neighborhood that he came from, it fits into that same narrative.

So, I think when we talk about extremism, we need to talk about the fear that it comes from and how we also have a responsibility to break that fear and understand it, and try to give people a sense of security, and at the same time, not allow that fear and that extremism to be legitimate. Because the fact that we understand where it comes from, the fact that we can do that analysis and say, well, they’re teenage kids, does not mean that in four years when they stand with a gun at a checkpoint, they don’t have responsibility for what they’re doing. They do have responsibility. But we also have the responsibility of trying to change that narrative to allow them to step out of extremism, because it’s very easy to talk about religious extremism or national extremism from our nice comfortable position of saying that that’s not us, but the reality is that it’s our responsibility. It’s definitely my responsibility as an Israeli who lives here and next year will be teaching in these schools and will teach these kids, but I also think that it’s the responsibility of the international community to understand how you change your narratives in your own communities as well, because if we really want to challenge that extremism, we need to give it an alternative. And that’s an alternative that, at the moment, doesn’t exist.

So, that would be my request to you, to challenge these extremisms in your own community, whatever they look like. And we’ll keep going back to Trump because this is a big issue at the moment, and for the Americans in the room, this is something that you need to deal with.Again, extremism is not about some white supremacist, anti-semit, islamophobic, homophobes. It’s your President! This is mainstream, so how do we take responsibility for changing that mainstream extremism and shifting it back to the extreme? Thank you.

Ms. Sahar Vardi has been active with Israeli anti-militarist groups such as New Profile and works as the Israel Program Coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee based in Jerusalem.
Comprehending Christian Zionism: Understanding the Movement and its Effect on Palestinian Life

by Dr. Robert Smith

It’s a pleasure to be here to participate in this panel on Christian extremism. In my home country, the United States, the only extremism openly discussed is associated with Muslims and Islam. Everyone else, including armed white men shooting Indian engineers in Kansas bars or occupying American facilities, are either mentally ill or defending American ideals. Muslims, however, need to be banned from or potentially removed from the country. Extremism is a subjective category with no clear definition. The Oxford English dictionary helpfully defines an extremist as a person who holds extreme religious or political views, especially one who advocates illegal, violent or other extreme action. Merriam Webster dictionary is no better, defining extremism as the quality or state of being extreme. In its special definition for English language learners, Merriam Webster says that extremism is belief in and support for ideas that are very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable. We learn from these definitions in their totality that an extremist is one who is extreme. More specifically, we learn that extremism is associated with radicalism and violence. In other words, designating something as extremist is a pejorative way to ensure that some ideas are beyond the pale, outside what most people consider correct or reasonable. Any idea outside the norm is potentially extremist. The designation, then, is a way to police the boundaries of thinkable thought, while stigmatizing any form of resistance to the presumably legitimate violence of the dominant collective. I wonder, then, how we can talk about extremism if we can’t say objectively what the word even means, much less build a conference theme around it. In the absence of clarity, I offer this working definition: Extremism is political action devoted solely to the implementation of its ideology rather than to the well-being of human communities. Religious extremism, it follows, is when such political action is informed, validated and sanctioned by religious commitments. Since it is singularly committed to ideological purity, even if the content of ideology can vary, extremism resists interaction with contrary ideals. The introduction of religious commitments further limits the possibility of reasoned critique. Religious claims resist critique because they draw upon proprietary sources of knowledge and truth. Therefore, the most effective critique of a religiously sanctioned ideology, extremist or not, is from within that religious tradition itself. Any discussion of Christian extremism, therefore, immediately invokes a notion of intra-Christian responsibility. It is much easier to externalize and ridicule than it is to take responsibility. And the first step toward taking responsibility is to seek understanding. My approach to Christian extremism is intimately bound up with the sweep of my academic project over all. For close to 20 years I’ve dwelt on the question of why American Christians act the way we act in relation to Israel and Palestine. This is a self-critical project because I am one of those American Christians. The ideas informing my action in this geography, Christian Zionism chief among them, are part of my own formative culture. As a result, I seek to understand rather than ridicule or simply dismiss. In this, I hope to challenge the Christian extremism permeating my home country, inflicting violence and pain on much the rest of the world. So, in what follows, I’ll share some of my research on Christian Zionism and discuss what we can do to challenge its continued primacy in western churches. Christian Zionism, first and foremost, has very little to do with the so-called rapture theology of premillennial dispensationalism developed in the late 1800s. It is, instead, the outgrowth of English Protestant biblical interpretation in the 1500s and 1600s when Protestants faced the dual threats of Roman Catholic and Ottoman imperial power. The resultant anti Catholic and anti Islamic theology imagined Jews to be allies in an apocalyptic drama. These ideas bolstered an English Puritan sense of special mission and superiority. When these ideas were transferred to English colonies in the New World, they soon informed the deepest undercurrents of in American identity and mission. When this tradition of Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation informed political action, the result was Christian Zionism.

The first documented example of Christian Zionism is in 1649, when two English subjects living in Amsterdam suggest to English authorities, including Oliver Cromwell, that the English civil wars would end if this nation of England, with the inhabitants of the Netherlands, shall be the first and readiest to transport Israel’s sons and daughters, in their ships, to the land promised to their forefathers. Several characteristics of Christian Zionism emerge through historical comparison. First, Christian Zionism constructs Muslims and Jews for its own theological and political purposes. Moreover, its anti Catholic and anti Islamic foundations conspire against any relationship between western and eastern Christians, especially those who claim it is possible to live with Muslim neighbors. Second, Christian Zionism is an imperial theology. In 1649, English and Dutch ships were not being built for pleasure cruises. These were ships of war and commerce, the tools of empire. In the theology of John Hagee today, the founder of Christians United for Israel, imperial strength is necessary for preserving the fact of Israel, which, of course, is a satrap, an imperial governor, for American and European imperial interests in the Middle East. Contemporary Christian Zionists can be understood as court theologians, serving the interests of corporate and military masters by providing religious sanction for state violence. Given the pervasive cultural consensus of Christian Zionism and its underlying theologies, Anglo American Christians tend to encounter this land as a projection of their own imaginations. The people associated with this land, both Jews and Palestinians, are commonly filtered through a literarily constructed notion of the land as a projection of their own imaginations. The people associated with this land, both Jews and Palestinians, are commonly filtered through a literarily constructed notion of the land as a projection of their own imaginations. The people associated with this land, both Jews and Palestinians, are commonly filtered through a literarily constructed notion of the land as a projection of their own imaginations.
of the imperial interests that structural violence drones and cruise civilized and sophisticated, as the other hand, promote theologies as violence. Christian Zionists, on the often denotes disorderly, barbarian the notion of extremism most communities in what many want of Jewish, Christian and muslim western disregard for the well-being Christian Zionism certainly fits being of human communities, Christian Zionism certainly fits the pure implementation of its commitments, devoted solely to ideology rather than the well-being of human communities.

If Christian extremism is political action informed, sanctioned and validated by Christian commitments, devoted solely to the term, advocates illegal violent or other extreme action by the state of Israel and its settlers, one cannot say, at least regarding the United States, that Christian Zionism is very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable. Christian Zionism, rather, rests at the root of American identity and culture. The resulting cultural consensus helps reinforce western disregard for the well-being of Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities in what many want to call “The Holy Land.” Moreover, the notion of extremism must often denotes disorderly, barbarian violence. Christian Zionists, on the other hand, promote theologies as civilized and sophisticated, as the structural violence drones and cruise missiles of the imperial interests that they serve. When progressive or liberationist Christians describe Christian Zionism as extremist, they risk thinking of the movement as marginal or as somehow illegitimate. This assessment minimizes the ongoing dangers of the movement as well as the sense of Christian responsibility that it demands. The first step for treating an illness is to seek a proper diagnosis, determining the ideology of the disease. What has caused this disease to come into being? If something is wrong, we must first stop merely recollecting from it and condemning it. Simply saying that cancer is a horrible, bad thing doesn’t get us anywhere toward treating it. The first step is seeking to understand. In physical illnesses, as well as theo-political maladies, this means diving deep into history and seeking comparative cases. In the midst of a pandemic, medical scientists have two primary tasks. First, to develop an antitote to cure the disease, or an inoculation to help prevent infection. In response to the many forms of religious extremism, including Christian Zionism afflicting our world today, religious communities, including churches, including Sabeel, have a responsibility to explore both tracks of action.

So, if discussing Christian extremism invokes a notion of intra-Christian responsibility, what shall we do? How can Christian Zionism be effectively challenged as a form of Christian extremism?

The panels of the past few days have made it clear that the antitote to extremism is not more extremism, state sponsored or otherwise. Within each religious community, extremism must, instead, be counteracted by robust moderation, a concept I helped develop with Bishop Munib Younan in his role as President of the Lutheran World Federation. Robust moderation is neither soft nor weak. It isn’t based in simplistic wishes that paper over the real challenges and differences facing many communities.

It, instead, promotes a vision for living together peaceably, recognizing the legitimacy of difference and seeking the good in the neighbor and for the neighbor. For those of us from countries far away from Nazareth and Zebabdeh, Jerusalem and Bethlehem, where Christian extremism seeks its own purposes through the violence of empire, our responsibility is not merely to condemn and certainly not to ridicule, but to shape a different vision, seeking not the theo-political interests of western empire, but the well-being of all the peoples of God, in Israel and Palestine and around the world.

I have several times attended events at the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center - and coming there always gives me mixed feelings. This compound, built by the French in the end of the 19th Century, was in 1948 the site of fierce fighting - in which my own father was involved. He never talks about it in any detail, but from the little he lets drop from time to time it must have been a harsh experience. “The Notre Dame - that was a real hell!” “Danny, my classmate, was a swell guy. He did not survive The Notre Dame.” I was reminded of all this once again when coming to attend this year’s Sabeel conference. Looking at the peaceful and neat lawns, the friendly and inviting halls and cafeteria, and trying to imagine how a young man who was going to become my father had been involved in a hideous life-and-death struggle with Palestinian militamen and Jordanian soldiers - on this very same terrain. And I reflected also on the fact that while this specific location is nowadays quiet and serene, the terrible conflict tearing this country apart did not end - it simply shifted to other locations.

I have always liked the idea of Liberation Theology, ever since I first heard of its appearance in Latin America, many years ago. I think it is highly applicable to the situation of the Palestinians in general and of Palestinian Christians, in particular. I think Sabeel has a very important role in reminding the world that there are Christian Palestinians and that they suffer from the Israeli occupation as much as do Muslim Palestinians. Which makes it more difficult to subsume Palestinian resistance to the occupation as just one more aspect of the “Worldwide Muslim Terrorist Threat”. And Sabeel has a very important role in confronting the version of Christianity which is peddled by various Evangelical groups (mainly in the US, but also in various other countries). Such groups support the most extreme forms of Israeli Jewish nationalism and racism, in the belief that Israeli provocations would bring on Armageddon (a nuclear one) and the Second Coming. (Neglecting to mention to their ardent Israeli supporters the fact that in their scenario of Armageddon about 90%...
of the Jews would perish in the cataclysm.)

I should make clear that I am myself not a religious believer, holding neither to the Jewish religion of my very pious paternal grandparents not to any other system of belief in a supernatural agency. Inevitably, in any gathering of religious people I can only be an observer, not a full-fledged member - though I consider myself an informed and highly interested observer of the world's religions and their adherents. While one may argue endlessly on whether or not God exists, there can be no question that human beings' belief in God (or in gods) exists and that it is of the most important forces shaping human society and history. As I stated when it was my turn to speak, in my view the effect of religion is to make a person more strong and determined in what he or she wants to do anyway. A person who wants to seek justice, do charity, help fellow human beings, make the world a better place - can be stronger, more firm and determined when believing that this is what God wants and commands. But unfortunately, also a person who wants to do evil deeds - to kill, enslave, persecute, torture, dispossession - can become more determined, persistent, obdurate in all these nasty things, if becoming convinced that THIS is what God wants and commands. I think you can find people of both kinds in the history of all religions, and all of them finding support for their divergent opinions in the same Scriptures and Holy Texts (the question is what to quote and what interpretation to give what you quote...) In short, I think that religion should be labeled "handle with care".

It was very clear to me that in the Sabeel conference I was among people whose interpretation of religion is humane and caring – a conference organized by progressive Christians and welcoming progressives of other religions (or of no religion). People like Rabbi Arik Ascherman, my long-time friend and fellow activist, whose brand of Judaism stands in sharp and refreshing contrast to the disgusting fare sadly offered by much of the Jewish religious establishment in Israel. Unfortunately, the pressure of many political and personal obligations prevented me from attending the whole of the Sabeel conference. Still, the part in which I did participate was enough to have a very satisfying contact with many warm-hearted and dedicated people, who asked intelligent questions and offered well-thought out comments. It was a chance to renew some old contacts, make many new ones, and meet for the first time face to face some people (especially Palestinians) with whom I had had long contact by email or Facebook.

Perhaps my most important contribution was three days after the conference ended, when my mobile phone suddenly rang. On the other end was Yishai Friedman, a journalist whom I encountered several times before: very polite and soft-spoken, but also a very committed supporter of the Israeli extreme right. His intent was very clear from the first question:

"You consider yourself a peace activist – so how could you participate in the conference of these Sabeel Israel-bashers, whose incitement verges on Antisemitism?"

"Incitement! Antisemitism! I noticed nothing of the kind, not the slightest trace of Antisemitism. They are Palestinians who suffer very much from Israeli occupation, and they spoke about it. I heard nothing inciting, I heard justified grievances which Israel should address."

"But they call for boycott of Israel! That is not the position of your organization, Gush Shalom, is it?"

"No, Gush Shalom called for a selective boycott, specifically aimed at settlements. That does not mean that we must impose our own agenda on all our interlocutors. Calling for boycott of Israel is a non-violent method of struggle. I very much prefer a Palestinian who calls for a boycott of Israel to one who blows himself up in a Tel Aviv bus."

"But these Sabeel people compare what they call the suffering of the Palestinians to the crucifixion of Jesus! Don't you see that this is just a new form of the old blood libel, accusing the Jews of the murder of Jesus?"

"Not at all. Of course, it is historically true that for many centuries Jews, living as vulnerable minorities in Christian countries, were collectively accused of complicity in the killing of Jesus. It is horribly true that this was used as the pretext for countless acts of persecution. In recent decades, the Catholic Church is doing a very great effort, largely successful, to root out this ugly perversion. But there is nothing comparable between this and pointing out the accurate fact that a people – the Palestinian people, composed of Muslims and Christians – is suffering occupation and dispossession at the hands of a state with the strongest army in the Middle East. And it is a fact that the state doing that is calling itself 'The State of the Jews, not 'The State of the Buddhists'."

"But still, don't you feel even a bit uncomfortable with the people who evoke the Crucifixion in this way? To go hobbnobbing with these people and speak in their conference and so on?"

"Not at all. I felt completely comfortable among the Sabeel people. They are Christians, and the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus is one of the main themes of being a Christian. It is natural for suffering Christians to compare their own suffering with that of Jesus, to speak of 'carrying a cross' and the like. For example, Christians suffering under a dictatorial regime in Latin America might make the same kind of comparison. Like it is habitual for Jews to make comparisons drawn from the Hebrew Bible. Just a few days ago, when PM Netanyahu made a speech about the Iranian Nuclear Program, he made an extensive reference to the persecution of Jews in the Persian Empire 2500 years ago, as depicted in the Book of Esther. The Islamic Republic of Iran, whatever else they may be accused of, certainly bears no responsibility for that."

There was much more of this, about a whole hour of political-theological debate. I several times pointed out that, though having been invited to speak at the Sabeel conference, I had in no way been authorized to speak on behalf of Sabeel – which I could hardly do, being neither a Christian nor a Palestinian. I suggested that he contact Sabeel directly and let its authorized representatives speak for themselves, and I gave him several phone numbers. Friedman said he intended to do so, specifically mentioning that he wanted to speak with Rev. Naim Ateek. As far as I know, however, he did not do it – leaving me in the position of having acted, willy-nilly, as the spokesperson of Sabeel. I hope I did an adequate job of it.

Adam Keller is an Israeli journalist and peace activist who was among the founders of Gush Shalom (Peace Blue), of which he is a spokesperson.
Continued from page 11

by Israel. So, put an end to secular lifestyles, impose hijab, segregation, no entertainment.


4. Islamic nationalism. Hamas married the two. So, nationalism is the Muslims ejecting the enemy from Muslim lands, and becomes an Islamic concept. Secularism is a western import, elitist. Hamas represents the mass of people.

5. Relations with the PLO. Hamas is the alternative. Opposes PLO Charter.

Islamic Jihad


Islamism

1. Loss of faith. The reason for Palestinian losses. Israel viewed as a product of Jewish faith. Therefore, Islamicisation will end secularism. Their influence has grown in the last decade and threatens to change the character of Palestinian resistance to Israel. The Palestinian election of 2006 brought in a Hamas dominated government. Since that time, the rift with the secular nationalism of Fateh has intensified, and today there is a separate regime ruling the two parts of the Palestinian areas.* The Western states have nurtured this rift by designating Hamas a terrorist organisation. In the wake of the bombings of September 11, 2001, Israel was quick to draw a comparison with the Palestinian Islamic movements, which laid the basis for this designation. With the addition of another Islamist movement, Hezbollah, the Islamic parties in Palestine are gaining ground. Thus, a conflict which was not religious in basis, has acquired a religious colouring. The Palestinian movements have developed partly in response to the religious dimension of Israel’s character, and partly because of Palestinian inability to defeat Israel. It is doubtful that they would have developed at all without Israel’s existence.


Friends of Sabeel North America (FOSNA)
Tarek Ahsan, Executive Director
PO Box 9186
Portland, Oregon 97207 USA
Tel: (+1)-503-653-6625
Email: friends@fosna.org
Website: www.fosna.org

Canadian Friends of Sabeel (CFS)
The Rev. Robert Assaly
7565 Newman Blvd.
P.O. BOX 3067
Montreal, QC H3N 3H2
Tel: (+1)-514-583-6625
Email: info@ncecsabeel.ca
Website: http://ncecsabeel.ca/

Friends of Sabeel United Kingdom (FOS-UK)
Mark Barthom, Director
Warrington Rd
Oxford OX4 6BZ
UK
Tel: (+44)1865 787428
Email: info@friendsofsabeel.org.uk
Website: www.friendsofsabeel.org.uk

Friends of Sabeel Ireland (FOS-IR)
Rev. Alan Martin
9 St. Marys Road
Dublin 16, Ireland
Tel: 00-353-1-295-2643
Email: a.martin24@gmail.com

Friends of Sabeel Netherlands (FOSNL)
Marike Gastra
Lobtribbendik 5
3991 EA Houten
Tel: (+31) 903 637-7619
Email: bijwonderen@palnet.nl
Website: www.wonderenvanzabeelnederland.nl

Sabeel Ecumencial Liberation Theology Center
P.O.B. 49084 Jerusalem 91491
Tel: 972-2.532.7136 Fax: 972-2.532.7137

General E-mail: sabelic@sabeel.org
Clergy Program: clergy@sabeel.org
International Programs: world@sabeel.org
Youth Program: youth@sabeel.org
Media: media@sabeel.org
Visiting: visit@sabeel.org

ISSUE 76, Fall 2017

22

Visit our newly revised website at www.sabeel.org

Sabeel

Nazareth
PO Box 50278 Nazareth 16120 Israel
Tel: 972(4)6020790
E-mail: nazareth@sabeel.org

International Friends of Sabeel

Friends of Sabeel Scandinavia and FOS Sweden
Kenneth Kimming
Nicolletgårds SE-162 56 Vällingby/ Sweden
Email: sabeelsverige@gmail.com
Website: www.sabeelsverige.se/

Friends of Sabeel Scandinavia in Norway
Kirkens Hus
Rådhusgata 1-3
0151 Oslo | Norway
Tel: +47 47340649
Email: hans.morten.augden@vid.no
Website: www.sabeelno.org

Friends of Sabeel Oceana Inc. (FOS-AU)
Ken Sparks
PO Box 148
Deception Bay Qld 4508 Australia
Email: kenjsparkst.co
Website: www.sabeel.org.au

Friends of Sabeel France
Ernest Reichert
12, rue de Kichberg
F- 67280 Wingen S Moder – France
Tel: +33 (0) 388 89 43 05
Email: ernest.reichert@gmail.com

Friends of Sabeel Germany
c/o Canon t.f. Ernst Ludwig Vater
Hagendornweg 1
70597 Stuttgart / Germany
Tel: +49 (0) 711 9073809
Email: fvsabeel-germany@vodafone.de
Website: www.fvsabeel-germany.de

Friends of Sabeel Nederland
Marike Gastra
Lobtribbendik 5
3991 EA Houten
Tel: (+31) 903 637-7619
Email: bijwonderen@palnet.nl
Website: www.wonderenvanzabeelnederland.nl
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.

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center
P.O.B. 49084 Jerusalem 91491
Tel: 972.2.532.7136
Fax: 972.2.5327137
Cornerstone: cornerstone@sabeel.org
or visit our website at: www.sabeel.org