

**Kennel-Charles Anabaptist Lecture -- Eastern Mennonite High School
How Christians have contributed to and could help transform the Middle East Conflict
10 January 2011**

During the past 10 years, I have engaged in two extended fasts. The first was a forty day fast before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. During that fast I sent a letter to President George W. Bush each day, encouraging him to consider alternatives to a military attack and reflecting on the likely consequences of going to war with Iraq. The second fast was for seventeen days during the Israeli military incursion of Gaza in January 2009. At the time, the tension in the region was palpable and the conflict seemed poised to spiral out of control.

I began both fasts feeling angry at the primary actors to the conflicts – and perhaps a bit self-righteous that I was above the fray.

But extended fasts have a way of slowing one down and forcing one to look deep inside. During both fasts, I became acutely aware of the seeds of hatred and violence that have taken root in my own life. Both times, I ended the fasts with a much greater clarity about my own contributions – and the contributions of the Christian community -- to the problems at hand.

It's easy for us to look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and point fingers at either the Israelis or the Palestinians – or perhaps both.

Some say, "If only Palestinian extremists would stop acts of terror and recognize Israel's right to exist, then there could be peace."

Others say, "If only Israel would end its occupation of Palestinian territories and recognize the rights of Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in 1948 and 1967, then there could be peace."

Indeed both of these are part of the truth.

Cindy and I have heard the horrific stories of Holocaust survivors and seen the graphic displays in the Holocaust museums in Jerusalem and Washington, D.C. It is impossible

to miss how this history has contributed to deep-rooted feelings of insecurity for many Jews. We have heard the painful stories of Israelis who lost their children to Palestinian suicide bombers during the past two decades.

We have also been to Gaza and seen the senseless destruction of the 2009 war – homes and schools reduced to rubble by Israeli bombs and tanks. A final act of the war was to destroy the cement factories in Gaza so that rebuilding would be difficult. (And, indeed, little rebuilding has happened to this day.) We have listened to parents in the West Bank talk about the terror their children felt when Israeli soldiers came to demolish their homes. We have heard many stories about Palestinians who died at Israeli checkpoints because soldiers would not allow them through to get medical care in Jerusalem. We have seen more miles of the Israeli separation wall than I care to describe. There is plenty of blame to spread around.

But tonight I'd like to focus on what our own contributions as a Christian community have been in perpetuating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And then to talk about what might be a hopeful way forward.

There are at least two notable Christian contributions – and not in the positive sense – to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: First, through centuries of anti-Semitism and persecution of Jewish people; Second, through a more recent embrace of Christian Zionist theology which has led to uncritical support for the Israeli government.

Anti-Semitism

Rev. John Pawlikowski, Professor of Social Ethics at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago writes:

In the second century and beyond, many of the principal Fathers of the Church began to write of Jews as a "rejected people" who were doomed to a life of marginality and misery. Jews were to wander the world as a "despised people." This image persisted in Christian preaching, art and popular teaching for centuries to come. In certain countries it often led to civil and political discrimination against Jews and in some instances to physical attacks on Jews which resulted in death. While some Popes, bishops and

Christian princes stepped up to protect Jews, they were clearly a minority. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations issued major statements repudiating this anti-Judaic theology and began a process of constructive Christian-Jewish interaction.

Indeed, it is painful to retrace the words and actions of prominent Christian leaders across the centuries. The website, *ReligiousTolerance.Org*¹ provides a sobering sampling of Christian persecution of Jews:

325 A.D. The *Council of Nicea* decided to separate the celebration of Easter from the Jewish Passover. They stated: "*For it is unbecoming beyond measure that on this holiest of festivals we should follow the customs of the Jews. Henceforth let us have nothing in common with this odious people...We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews...our worship follows a...more convenient course...we desire dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews...How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are almost certainly blinded.*"

337 A.D. Christian Emperor Constantius created a law which made the marriage of a Jewish man to a Christian punishable by death.

367 – 376 A.D. St. Hilary of Poitiers referred to Jews as a perverse people who God has cursed forever. St. Ephroem refers to synagogues as brothels.

380 A.D. The bishop of Milan was responsible for the burning of a synagogue; he referred to it as "*an act pleasing to God.*"

415 A.D. St. Augustine wrote "*The true image of the Hebrew is Judas Iscariot, who sells the Lord for silver. The Jew can never understand the Scriptures and forever will bear the guilt for the death of Jesus.*"

418 A.D. St. Jerome, who created the Vulgate translation of the Bible, wrote of a synagogue: "*If you call it a brothel, a den of vice, the Devil's refuge, Satan's fortress, a place to deprave the soul, an abyss of every conceivable disaster or whatever you will, you are still saying less than it deserves.*"

613 A.D. Very serious persecution began in Spain. Jews were given the options of either leaving Spain or converting to Christianity. Jewish children over 6 years of age were taken from their parents and given a Christian education.

694 A.D. The 17th Church *Council of Toledo*, Spain defined Jews as the serfs of the prince. This was based, in part, on the beliefs by . . . Church Fathers that God punished the Jews with perpetual slavery because of their alleged responsibility for the execution of Jesus.

722 A.D. Leo III outlawed Judaism. Jews were baptized against their will.

1096 A.D. The *First Crusade* was launched in this year. Although the prime goal of the crusades was to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims, Jews were a second target. As the soldiers passed through Europe on the way to the Holy Land, large numbers of Jews were challenged: "*Christ-killers, embrace the Cross or die!*" 12,000 Jews in the Rhine Valley alone were killed in the first Crusade. This behavior continued for 8 additional crusades until the 9th in 1272.

1099 A.D. The Crusaders forced all of the Jews of Jerusalem into a central synagogue and set it on fire. Those who tried to escape were forced back into the burning building.

1180 A.D. The French King of France, Philip Augustus, arbitrarily seized all Jewish property and expelled the Jews from the country. There was no legal justification for this action. They were allowed to sell all movable possessions, but their land and houses were stolen by the king.

1189 A.D. Jews were persecuted in England. The Crown claimed all Jewish possessions. Most of their houses were burned.

Palestinian Christian, Alex Awad, notes that, ironically, during the Middle Ages, it was initially the Muslims who protected the Jews and the Christians who persecuted them.

Awad writes:

Before 1492, Muslim Moors ruled the southern half of Spain. Under their control, the approximately one million Jews living in Spain experienced what is referred to as the “Golden Era” in the Jewish Diaspora. Along with highly cultured Muslim and Christian Arabs, Jews flourished in the fields of science, business, medicine, music, art, and literature. But after the Christian north drove out the Moors, Jews would not experience the benevolent rule they had formerly enjoyed. The Spanish Inquisition in the Middle Ages threatened the very existence of the Jewish people. Under its threat not one person could profess that he or she was a Jew. Any Jew who did not convert to Christianity was baptized by force, banished, or killed.”²

In his book, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews*, James Carroll chronicles the shameful Christian history of mistreating Jews. Across the centuries, Christians perpetrated pogroms against the Jewish community. Prominent church leaders like Martin Luther called for the burning of synagogues and defined Jews as “the born enemy of the German Christian.” Many Christians stood silent during the Holocaust. According to Carroll, “Support of Hitler was not only allowed to Catholics, but was required of them.”

Our own Anabaptist response during World War II and the aftermath of the Holocaust was modest. In the early 1940s, MCC helped to house a very small number of Jewish refugees in southern France.³ MCC provided food packages to Christian Jews in Hungary in 1947 and 1948.⁴

As Christians, we must own the fact that our forebears in the faith – including prominent church leaders -- have contributed to the feelings of insecurity that led many Jews to conclude – rightly or wrongly -- that the only place of safety would be to have a Jewish homeland, a Jewish state.

Christian Zionism

Many Christians have equally contributed to the plight of the Palestinians by buying into a theology of Christian Zionism. Seeing the return of the Jewish people to historic Palestine as a prerequisite for the return of Christ, some Christians have thrown their uncritical support behind the Israeli government – no matter how abusive its policies have been.

Christians have watched in silence as our Palestinian sisters and brothers – both Christian and Muslim – have suffered under years of occupation and oppression at the hands of a powerful Israeli government backed by our own U.S. government.

Alex Awad, academic dean at Bethlehem Bible College, describes the tenants of Christian Zionism as follows:

1. Jews have special favor with God and neither time, history nor the religious conditions of Jews can affect or alter God's special favor towards the Jewish people.
2. The Holy Land belongs to the Jews. It always has and it always will. Neither history, nor the passing of centuries, nor the religious or moral condition of Jews today can alter this fact.
3. Jews today are an extension of the Israelites in Biblical times. Therefore, just as the nations during the Old Testament era were judged as to how they treated ancient Israel, the same is true today. God will bless nations and individuals who bless the modern Jewish state and he will curse countries and individuals who curse it.

4. Old Testament prophecies, although uttered thousands of years ago, are being fulfilled In Israel today and have been since 1948 when the state was born.
5. God's 'end time' plan is directly connected with modern Israel. Christians can speed up the coming of Christ, as they help bring about the fulfillment of prophecies that pertain to Israel.”⁶

Palestinian Christians are deeply pained by what they perceive as the Western church's uncritical embrace of this Christian Zionist theology. They see this theology as providing cover for the abusive practices of the Israeli government – such as confiscation of Palestinian land, demolition of Palestinian homes, building illegal settlements on Palestinian property, economic siege and a military occupation that has lasted more than 40 years now. And they see it as making their lot as Christians in the Middle East much more vulnerable. And, indeed, Christians have been leaving the Middle East in alarming numbers during the past several decades.

Alex Awad, a Palestinian Baptist pastor, who is as gentle a person as you will ever meet describes being at a conference for evangelical Christians in Jerusalem, when an American Christian woman walked to the microphone and told all the Palestinian Christians in the room that “God wanted them all to leave Israel and go to other Arab countries.”⁶

Alain Epp Weaver wrote in the July-September 2005 issue of MCC's *Peace Office Newsletter*, that “Congregations ‘adopt illegal Israeli settlements, sending funds to bolster the defense of these armed colonies. Christian Zionists organize prayer vigils and letter writing campaigns in support of Israeli military offensives . . . and against any Israeli territorial concessions...”

In short, many Christian Zionists actually work against any peace process.

Last January, Cindy and I visited Gaza along with the directors of MCC's advocacy offices in Washington, D.C., New York City and Ottawa. We met with Constantine

Dabbagh, Executive Secretary for the Near East Council of Churches. The Near East Council operates medical clinics and job training centers in Gaza. One of their medical clinics was completely destroyed by an Israeli bomb in January 2009.

There are approximately 2,500 Christians in Gaza, out of a population of 1.5 million persons. That's what made it quite astounding that Constantine Dabbagh expressed far greater concern about the effect of Christian Zionism than about radical Muslims.

He appealed for Western Christians to think about the impact of their Christian Zionist theology and how it is providing cover for the Israeli government to mistreat Palestinians. "We are living in a big prison here. . . . What is happening (in Gaza) is against all rules of God and of international law," lamented Dabbagh, "The silence of the international community is the silence of graves." He went on to say that the "acceptance of Christians [in Gaza] will be jeopardized if Western bias continues."

"Your theologians must do something about this," Dabbagh appealed. "We are all the chosen people of God." Indeed, Constantine said that his Christian organization in Gaza didn't want the aid of Western groups if it is not coupled with advocacy about their political situation.

Constantine made it clear that he did not want Westerners to be against Israel – but only that they should also be concerned about the well-being of Palestinians. "We are not animals who only need to be fed and watered. . . . Our backs are to the wall."⁷

At their core, both anti-Semitism and Christian Zionism contain the seeds of violence. They distort the fact that all humans are created in God's image and that God loves the world, not only one nation or people. Anti-Semitism assumes that God has rejected the Jewish people and that they deserve to be punished. Christian Zionism assumes that God favors some people groups more than others. It undermines the very essence of Christ's atoning work to make one body from two warring groups – Jews and Gentiles.

So how might we constructively address these tragic theological distortions that many in the Christian community have embraced?

Response to anti-Semitism

What might be an appropriate response to the sad history of anti-Semitism? The Lutheran Church apology to the Mennonite community has received a great deal of attention in these past several years. It was not a simple matter of sending a letter or making a quick phone call from the Lutheran headquarters to Mennonite offices in Strasbourg or Elkhart or Newton. Rather, it involved many conversations at local and denominational levels that culminated in Lutheran leaders attending the Mennonite World Conference in Paraguay in 2009 and Mennonite leaders attending the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in 2010.

Not only did the process talk about the past persecution of Anabaptists by Lutherans, but also about what kind of future that Lutherans and Anabaptists are committed to building together.

Could this be a model for Christian church today with regard to the Jewish community? Some might say, “Well, we ourselves did not persecute Jews. What point is there in us repenting?” Or, “Mennonites did better than some Christians in responding to the Holocaust.” True, perhaps, but collectively many Jews are still living with this history. And I would argue that this history of persecution contributes significantly to the heavy emphasis on security that we see in Israeli society today.

What might happen if, at the local level, we began to form relationships with synagogues for conversation and acknowledgement? What would happen if we took time to listen to the stories of pain, abandonment and fear? Acknowledging this shameful past and apologizing for the church’s contribution to the suffering of the Jewish people could help create a foundation for a stronger future.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported recently that, “Representatives of the Amish community from the United States and Switzerland paid a visit to the Western Wall on Saturday

night, where they asked the Jewish people's forgiveness for their group's silence during the Nazi extermination of Jews in the Holocaust."⁸ The *Post* went on to say: "It is likely that this delegation does not represent the Amish at large."⁹ Indeed, many of the delegation members had been ex-communicated from the Amish church.

Their gesture is noteworthy, nevertheless. Still, it is unfortunate that the delegation went on to declare its unreserved support for the State of Israel. Apologizing for past wrongs does not mean that we embrace current policies of oppression.

Response to Christian Zionism

What might be an appropriate response to Christian Zionism? We can disagree over whether God's chosen people are Israeli Jews or the church -- or both. But surely we should be able to agree that whoever God's chosen people are, they are called to be a blessing to all nations -- to all peoples.

We can disagree over whether or not the current State of Israel is the same as biblical Israel, but certainly we can agree that God gives no government the license to oppress and occupy another people.

We can disagree over whether or not the return of Jews to Palestine is a prerequisite for the return of Christ. But certainly we can agree that the return of Jews to the land doesn't necessarily exclude the possibility of Palestinians also living there. Indeed, for more than 1,000 years Jews, Christians and Muslims lived in relative harmony in the so-called Holy Land. The current conflict is less rooted in the historic tension between Isaac and Ishmael than it is rooted in the taking of Palestinian land in 1948 and 1967 for the creation of the State of Israel.

The words of Palestinian Christian Constantine Dabbagh still ring in my ears: "The theologians should do something about Christian Zionist theology."

Dr. Patricia Shelly, Professor of Bible and Religion at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas, offers this helpful framework for thinking about Christian Zionism and God's promise of land in the book of Genesis:

1. God is the rightful owner of the land. . . . God's ownership of the land relativises all other land claims, and gives primacy to God's directions about how to live on the land...
2. God's gift of land is always linked to covenant responsibility. . . . The promise of land is not unconditional, but depends on justice for all its inhabitants...
3. God promises land to the landless and warns those who control territory to practice justice...
4. Interpreting the promise of land is linked to our concept of God. Through the ministry of the prophets and the experience of exile, the people of the Old Testament come to see that God is not narrowly confined to a specific geography or land, but reigns over all nations and loves every land and its peoples...
5. God's purpose in giving the land to Abraham's descendants is to bless all nations. . . . The land is not an end in itself but should lead to a blessing of all the nations.

The future of the Middle East depends on Israelis and Palestinians finding a way to build a secure future together. It is right to encourage public officials to engage in serious peace negotiations. We should support calls for ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and for just treatment of Palestinian refugees. We should condemn all forms of violence – be they suicide bombers or military incursions into Gaza and the West Bank.

But the future of the Middle East also depends on Christians taking responsibility for their historic role in the conflict. We have contributed significantly to the persecution of Jews and to the oppression of Palestinians. We are not above the fray in this conflict.

May God grant us the courage and creativity to repent of this past and to find a more constructive and humble path forward.

J. Daryl Byler

Endnotes:

1. http://www.religioustolerance.org/jud_pers1.htm
2. Awad, Alex, *Through the Eyes of the Victims*, p. 15.
3. September 1, 1942 journal entry from J.N. Byler, writing from Lyon, France.
4. Unruh, John D., *In the Name of Christ*, p. 132.
5. Awad, Alex, *Christian Zionism: Their Theology, Our Nightmare!* MCC Peace Office Newsletter, Vol. 35, No. 3, July-Sept. 2005, p. 2.
6. *Ibid*, p. 2.
7. Quotes from personal conversation with Constantine Dabbagh, January 22, 2010.
8. Mandel, Jonah, *Amish community asks forgiveness of Jews at Kotel*, Jerusalem Post, November 28, 2010, online version available at:
<http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=197087>
9. *Ibid*.
10. Shelly, Patricia, *Christian Zionism and Genesis' Promise of Land*, MCC Peace Office Newsletter, Vol. 35, No. 3, July-Sept. 2005, pp. 4-5.