

The Anti-Semitism of the Presbyterian Church, USA

With the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA scheduled to convene in June for the first time since the 2004 GA passed a notorious anti—Israel divestment resolution, supporters and detractors of divestment are discussing whether the Church's decision was anti—Semitic, or — somehow — anti—Israel without being anti—Semitic. Curiously, despite the storm caused by the divestment vote, most Presbyterians remain unaware of the extent to which the PCUSA leadership has involved itself in old—fashioned theological anti—Semitism.

The anti—Semitic alliances undertaken by the national church are particularly surprising in light of the well—known open—minded and unbiased attitudes of the overwhelming majority of Presbyterians.

One of the resolutions passed at the 2004 General Assembly included a list of recommended theological 'resources.' The most troubling 'resource' on the list is the Sabeel Center for Liberation Theology. Presbyterians are familiar with liberation theology, an approach that emerged after the Second Vatican Council, focusing on Jesus as liberator of the poor and oppressed.

As political theory, it is often characterized by opponents as 'might makes wrong,' positing, as it does, that the wealthy and the powerful are definitionally unjust, and that any claim made by the poor is necessarily just. Sabeel blends this theology with Replacement Theology, in which God rescinds His covenant with the children of Israel, replacing the Jews with Christians (rather than adding a New and more universal Covenant or Testament between God and the Church to the enduring Covenant between God and the Jewish people).

Replacement theology last resurfaced in the work of proto—Nazi theologians, notably Adolf von Harnack. It is also known as Supersessionism. Mainstream theologians perceive a worrying reappearance of supersessionism (Replacement Theology) in the work of the Sabeel Center.

In 1987 the PCUSA formally rejected Replacement Theology:

We believe and testify that this theory of supersessionism or replacement is harmful and in need of reconsideration....We affirm that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world... We affirm the continuity of God's promise of land along with the obligations of that promise to the people Israel.

This official position has not stopped the leadership of the PCUSA from entering into a close relationship with the Sabeel Center and other proponents of supersessionism. The overtly anti—Semitic Sabeel Center is an official partner of the PCUSA, and receives PCUSA financial support.

Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor from Bethlehem and guest at the 2004 GA, typifies the Replacement Theology belief that the Palestinians have replaced the Jews in God's scheme for the world.

If the Exodus is the story of any people, it is actually the story of us Palestinians.

In the strange ideation of Palestinian Liberation Theology, Palestinians replace Jews as the people of the Book and the people of the land. Thus the banner that hung over Manger Square in Bethlehem one recent Christmas read:

Greetings to the birthplace of the Jesus, the first Palestinian revolutionary.

When they retell the Christmas story, Palestinian Christians do not tell how the baby Jesus was born 'in Bethlehem in Judea,' as the text of the Gospel reads. Rather, they alter the text to exclude the fact that Jesus was born in a Jewish country, and say: 'in Bethlehem in Palestine.' And, of course, there is the absurd claim, repeated by Palestinian Christian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi and others, that Jesus was a Palestinian.

Jesus, of course, was a Jew. The term Palestine was not yet coined at the time Jesus lived. It came into use only after the national revolt of the Jews of Judea under Bar Kochba (132—135AD) gave the Romans an incentive to rename the province in an effort to exterminate Jewish nationalism by erasing the name of Judea from the map. The renaming of the country aside, it is absurd to assert that Jesus was a Palestinian since Palestinian ethnic identity — an Arab ethnic identity — cannot pre—date the Arab conquest

of the seventh century. Before the Arab conquest, the Holy Land had Jews, Aramaic—speaking Christians, and Greek—speaking Christians, but no Arabs.

Rev. Naim Ateek, is head of the Sabeel Center, Canon of St George's Anglican Cathedral, Jerusalem, and the leading voice of Palestinian Replacement Theology. In addition to heading an official 'Partner' of the PCUSA, he is a frequent guest speaker at Presbyterian gatherings and regular host to visiting delegations of Presbyterian clergy.

Ateek flatly denies that Israel has a right to exist, describes Israelis as immoral and demonic, and salts his sermons with the language of Jewish deicide. In his 2001 Easter message he stated that

...in this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around Him....The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily.

Ateek dismisses the Old Testament as 'repugnant.'

Before the creation of the State [of Israel], the Old Testament was considered to be an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus. Since the creation of the State, some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians . . . The fundamental question of many Christians, whether uttered or not, is: How can the Old Testament be the Word of God in light of the Palestinian Christians' experience with its use to support Zionism?' (Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), pp.77—78.)

One cannot help but notice that the Old Testament has been used one time or another to support everything from slavery to the divine right of kings, without becoming 'repugnant' in the eyes of Christians other than Rev. Ateek.

Presbyterian pastors working with Arab Christians takes liberties with the text, pretending that Biblical passages that refer to the presence of the Children of Israel in the Land of Israel simply do not exist.

Pastors approach (the Old Testament texts) with care, or just give up and stick to the Gospels." says the Rev. Ben Weir, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) missionary who spent his career in the Middle East. (Alexa Smith, 'Old Testament "war stories" wound Palestinian Christians, Presbyterian News Service, August 24, 2000)

Dr. A. Clare Brandabur, speaking at a Sabeel Center Conference in Bethlehem, chose not to ignore, but actually to vilify the Bible:

We must liberate God from the Old Testament. To me this is in fact the real meaning of a theology of Liberation for the Palestinian crisis.... your Old Testament Yahweh is a bigot and a genocidal maniac, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as you understand him, is not my God." (Dr. A. Clare Brandabur, The Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem: Hoping Against Hope, Sabeel Center website,)

The more common strategy among anti—Israel Arab Christians is simply to ignore the inconvenient passages.

The question of how to interpret the Old Testament upsets many Palestinians so much that they just don't bother (to teach the Old Testament) anymore. Some of the texts are very painful, very difficult to follow, you know?" says Rev. Mitri Raheb. "Pieces in the Book of Joshua, some pieces in Judges... Some are very ugly." (Alexa Smith, 'Old Testament "war stories" wound Palestinian Christians,' Presbyterian News Service, August 24, 2000)

Many Palestinian churches have carefully edited the Book of Psalms, deleting the words 'Israel' and 'Zion' every time they appear. (Elizabeth Smith Gamble, *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1992 pp. 80—90) (this source available only in print)

All of this is particularly disturbing in the light of the fact that not only the PCUSA but almost all western churches have repudiated Replacement Theology, motivated in part by a recognition of its intrinsic anti—Semitism. To see this anti—Jewish theology resurface among the small but historically precious churches of the Holy Land is troubling, but to see the leaders of the Presbyterian Church USA formally embrace and financially support the openly anti—Semitic attitudes of the Replacement theologians of the Sabeel Center and other Palestinian Liberation Theologians is appalling.

The voices of those who demonize Israel are so pervasive in the church hierarchy, that blatant canards slip smoothly into print in Presbyterian Magazines.

Publishing Anti—Israel Canards

The January issue of Presbyterian Outlook featured an interview with former Presbyterian Church — USA Moderator Fahed Abu—Akel (Former moderator discusses Middle East Situation, Lead Up to 2006 General Assembly.)

The choice of Abu—Akel as an expert on the Middle East situation is questionable because of an incident in which he arranged for an anti—Semitic speaker at a Presbyterian College. The speaker showed the Star of David morphing into a swastika and cited the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. When the incident drew press attention, Abu Akel defended the Anti—Semitic speaker, "I heard this man do an excellent presentation in a church."

In the Outlook interview, Abu—Akel asserted

Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister of the state of Israel, is the one who ordered the Israeli military to break the bones of Palestinian children.

Readers will recall that during the first intifada, Palestinian teenagers began to throw stones, confident that Israeli soldiers would not return fire with live ammunition. A long list of Israelis have been killed by the stones thrown by Palestinian youth. Prime Minister Rabin, furious at this lethal new form of 'protest,' was quoted as saying: "If you throw rocks, we'll break your arm." This was a verbal threat. Rabin never 'ordered' the 'military' to 'break the bones of Palestinian children.' No retraction has been printed by the Outlook.

The Anti—Semitism of Denying the Right of Self—Defense to Jews

In the aftermath of the controversial General Assembly of July 2004, the call for 'selective divestment of holdings in multinational corporations doing business in Israel/Palestine' has drawn the most attention. It should not be allowed to overshadow the implications of the resolution 'Calling for an End to the Construction of a Wall by the State of Israel.'

Every state has not only the right but the duty to protect the lives of its citizens. Christians traditionally base this right on the work of St. Augustine. Critics, of course, can and do criticize the means a state chooses for its defense, but the security barrier being built by Israel stands out as a supremely pacific way of defensive war. Except at times of security alert, thousands of people pass daily through checkpoints designed to ascertain that they are not wanted terrorists and not carrying lethal weapons. Yes, it is humiliating for Arabs to be constantly searched and questioned. But we are dealing with a situation where ambulances, baby carriages, the book bags of school children, and the false 'bellies' of women pretending to be pregnant have been used repeatedly to conceal bombs destined for the massacre of civilians.

This enemy, it must be recalled, consists of an array of organizations: Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, pledged to destroy the state of Israel. They deliberately target, kill, and maim the innocent.

Against this campaign of murder, Israel posts its sons and daughters — including the proud sons of Israeli Muslim Bedouin — at checkpoints. Armed with metal detectors and rifles, they attempt to keep out the bombers without harming the innocent.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church did not vote to question the route selected for the security barrier. It did not call upon Israel to protect the dignity of people passing through these checkpoints. It did not deny to any other nation the right to protect the lives of its citizens. And it certainly did not vote to demand that the United States cease to use weapon and bomb detectors at Louisville International Airport. The PCUSA

'call(ed) for an end to the construction of a wall by the State of Israel.'

In doing so it denied to Israel even the right to defend itself by pacific means.

Some PCUSA leaders actually appear to believe that they can endorse both 'the existence of Israel within legitimate and secure borders,' and 'the rights of (Palestinian) refugees to return.'

The two are mutually exclusive. Either there is a Jewish State, or Palestinian Arabs have a right to return to the places where their grandparents and great—grandparents lived in 1948. Because Palestinian Arabs have had one of the world's highest birth rate for most of the past six decades, they would outnumber the Jewish residents and the Jewish State would cease to exist.

It is obvious that few Israelis can 'return' to the places where their own great—grandparents lived before 1948: Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and the lamentably anti—Semitic former Soviet states. More importantly, Jewish Israelis want to live in a Jewish State. Arabs who wish to live in an Arab Muslim state have 22 choices, 23 if the Palestinian Arabs choose to set up a Palestinian State alongside the Jewish one. Jews have only one state.

Officials of the PCUSA began to demand a Palestinian 'right of return' — code for the destruction of the Jewish State — as far back as the year 2000. Overtures endorsing a Palestinian 'right of return' passed the General Assembly in 2003 and 2004. Former Moderator Fahed Abu—Akel has long endorsed a Palestinian Arab 'right of return,' a policy that would result in the destruction of the State of Israel. Victor Makari, Area Coordinator for Europe and the Middle East for the PCUSA, told the Jerusalem Report on Sept. 6, 2004 that his preferred solution to the Israeli—Palestinian conflict is a 'shared democratic state,' (code for the destruction of Israel) and allowed that he was aware that such a solution is tantamount to demographic suicide.

In endorsing a Palestinian Arab 'right of return,' these Church leaders are calling for an end to the Jewish State. Such a call, from a Church that has not called for the end of the Scottish State, or an end to the Sudanese State, or an end to any other sovereign state, is an anti—Semitic act. The actions of the Presbyterian Church USA are not being called anti—Semitic merely because church leaders have been critical of Israel. The actions of this church are widely viewed as anti—Semitic because the 2004 General Assembly took a formal position denying to the Jewish State the right to defend itself.

And because the PCUSA has warmly embraced and financially supported overtly anti—Semitic proponents of the Palestinian Liberatorin Theology of 'replacement' or 'supercessionism.'

When a Church, however venerable and long—respected, takes anti—Semitic positions and embraces advocates of anti—Semitic theology, I and others must, in sadness, identify the evil we see.