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POSTPONING ARMAGEDDON?
CHRISTIAN ZIONIST AND PALESTINIAN
CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF PEACE

PAUL S. ROWE

Introduction

Of all the problems of peacemaking and peacebuilding in the modern international system, none is as contentious a matter of religion and identity as that of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The weight of spiritual significance and history has caused more than one author to expound upon the way religion has uniquely marked this land. Foreign interest and interference in the allocation of privileges and ownership in the region have led one recent analyst to bemoan the plight of this “much too promised land.” (Miller 2008)

In a history of the conflict written long before its descent into the first and second intifadas and the expansion of the number of religious antagonists, David Smith noted that

...the years after the 1967 [Arab-Israeli] war would defy a solution an spawn a new conflict between Arabs and Jews. In the tiny battleground of the West Bank – just 80 miles long and 26 miles wide – the two peoples would live together, contesting the same territory. Many on both sides would claim that it was granted to them by God... In the process, Arabs and Jews would be locked in a modern-day secular conflict, fuelled by age-old religious zealotry and bigotry. They would become prisoners of God. (Smith 1987: 4)

Many would counter that the role of ethnic belonging and the content of the dispute over tangible assets and territory overshadow the role of religion.

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But it would be next to impossible to explain the conflict without reference to the way religion shapes notions of ethnic identity and the particular significance of such material assets, or to the relevance of particular religious actors and motivations.

The intensification of religion as a contributing force to the identity politics of both Israelis and Palestinians, as well as among key regional and global allies, has been remarked by a variety of scholars over the past few decades. Many of these works reinforce the institutional and political obstacles that are raised by religious radicals and reactionaries, both within the region and outside. In the midst of the first intifada prominent theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether published an indictment of the Religious Zionist, Islamist, and Christian Zionist movements' uncompromising defence of a religious claim to the “Holy Land.” (Ruether and Ruether 2002) Recent works by Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar as well as Gershom Gorenburg detail the history of settlement-building supported by religious Zionists and others and their contribution to the prolonged conflict (Gorenburg 2006, Zertal 2007). An array of scholars has addressed the role of Islamist militants in proffering violent resistance to the Israeli occupation (for example, Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010). Thus it should not come as a surprise that John Bunzl notes that “the politicization of religion and sacralization of politics, unavoidably tends to heighten conflict.” (Bunzl 2004: 2) Overall, conventional wisdom seems to suggest that religion is more destructive than constructive in the context of the Middle East conflict.

In the case of Christian actors and influences on the conflict, a group of recent books has documented the various ways in which colonial and more modern transnational influences have contributed to complicating and prolonging the conflict, if not promoting a zero-sum mentality that demands ultimate victory for the Israeli side (Merkley 2001, Sizer 2004, Ateek, Duaybis and Tobin 2005, Clark 2007). The popularity of the religious connection to Israel and its impact on American foreign policy in the Middle East has been remarked by many of these. Critical texts telegraph fears of the association of Christian nationalist sentiment with the imperial ambitions of American government abroad and theonomic movements in the United States. Indeed, one bemoans that “this is how our present leaders see the world, delusions of power marching hand in hand with the religious delusions of those who dream of prophecy and hear God whispering in their ears.” (Davidson 2007:
Victoria Clark’s journalistic work *Allies for Armageddon* describes in some detail the wide variety of Christian Zionist agencies, televangelists, and religious institutions dedicated to an apocalyptic vision of a Middle Eastern future, “an ideology that fills much of the rest of the world with a mixture of disbelief and alarm.” (Clark 2007: 258)

Among Palestinian Christians, western Christian Zionism causes great consternation. Palestinian Christians have felt the effects of the 1948 war (*al-nekba*) and 1967 war (*al-neksa*) as refugees, exiles, and subjects under occupation. They have participated as leaders and proponents of the national struggle and their churches have responded to the crises of war through social concern, relief, and reconstruction projects (Ashrawi 1995, King 1981, Ekin 1985). Historically, numerous Christian lay activists have had a role in the secular national movement, from the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to the leading ranks of Fatah. However, by the late 1980s, the growing influence of Western Christian support for Israeli foreign and domestic policies sparked a crisis among many Palestinian Christians. The very scriptures that were the bedrock of the Christian message were increasingly used to justify their own dispossession from the land of their heritage. While ordinary parishioners supported political resistance to the Israeli occupation and marshaled criticism of the Israeli state, clergy tended to favour cooperation with the powers that be (Chacour 2001: 22-24). The result was alienation of Palestinian Christians from their own churches and from foreign coreligionists.

Beginning at the time of the first intifada, a new generation of Palestinian Christian leaders began to challenge the common theological assumptions underpinning Christian Zionist claims in support of Israeli policies. The involvement of a number of Christians in the non-violent resistance to the Israeli occupation, such as the foundation of the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence by Mubarak Awad in 1983, and the participation of thousands of Christian citizens during the Beit Sahour tax revolt of 1989, marked a sea-change in the activism of a number of Palestinian Christian leaders. Many of these leaders entered the ranks of the church leadership in the Eastern Rite and Latin Catholic Churches, as well as the Anglican and other Protestant Churches. By the early 1990s, most of these churches were headed by indigenous Palestinian clergy, which proved to be a revolutionary development. Other Christian leaders elaborated new strategies to bring a
Christian voice to the plight of Palestinians in Israel and in the occupied territories. The new generation was more interested in bringing Christian faith to bear as a means of critiquing the Israeli occupation and the ongoing statelessness of millions of Palestinians. The religious critique often stood as a direct rebuke of the Christian Zionist apologetic for the state of Israel, but also arose as a challenge to the more traditional secular politics of the Palestinian Christian minority, which had more typically followed the secular line of the Communist movement in Israel and within the Palestinian diaspora. Perhaps most noteworthy is the growing contribution of Protestant activists to the theological challenge leveled against Christian Zionism, given its roots in fundamentalist and evangelical Protestant circles.

In their recent book *Gods Century*, Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah present a case for understanding religion’s political role as a function of a combination of a religious actor’s growing autonomy from the state and the nature of its political theology (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011: 9). The expanded influence of religious organizations as autonomous actors in the past few decades has led political theorists to give greater credence to the power of religious theology. For the believer, theology provides answers to defining questions about origins, the nature of humanity, the plight of human beings in need of illumination, and the means of transcending the human condition are common questions addressed in theology. For political theology, the nature of peace is equally a common theme. Peace is a relative term: linguistic and hermeneutic differences in the way peace is understood in various religions mean that even though it is a central theological concept for most believers, the nature of peace remains a matter of controversy (Carter and Smith in Coward and Smith 2004: 279-301). For Christians, the term is weighted with contradictory meanings in both Hebrew and Greek scriptures and has both spiritual and temporal importance.

In this essay, I briefly explain the challenge of Christian Zionism as a theological problem for Palestinian Christians and profile two disparate Protestant theological critiques developed since the time of the first intifada, with specific emphasis on the nature of peace. Naim Ateek, an Anglican clergyman and founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, became the spokesman for a Palestinian Liberation Theology that seeks to provide a contextual Christian response to occupation and a vehicle for demanding justice. Palestinian Liberation Theology is self-consciously
partial to the demands of the Palestinian people for redress of their grievances and their national aspirations. On the other hand, Salim Munayer, a Protestant theologian and founder of the Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation, elaborates a Theology of Reconciliation which he sees as a bridge between Christians of both Jewish and Palestinian origins. Though Ateek’s theology levels a more fundamental challenge to the Christian Zionist position, it is Munayer’s attempt to bridge the ethnic divide that shows the greatest promise in influencing Western Christian perspectives.

A False Peace? Christian Zionist Scepticism

While Christian Zionist thinking has a lengthy pedigree, the modern approach taken by Western Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists has its roots in the early development of Fundamentalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Reflecting on political developments of the time, fundamentalist Christians began to apply prophetic passages to their understanding of world events. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire provided an opportunity for Britain to become increasingly involved in the Middle East as an imperial (or later, “mandatory”) power. When the British conquered the Holy Land via Egypt during the First World War the government communicated its support for “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine under the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Ruether and Ruether, among others, suggest the latent interest that underlaid support for the Zionist project in Palestine, both in the association of Britain as a sort of new Jerusalem and in “a Christian religious culture that had long believed, not only that modern Jews represent the ancient Hebrews of the Bible, but also that their restoration as a nation in Palestine is integral to the establishment of a future reign of peace and righteousness on earth.” (Ruether and Ruether 2002: 77) While the influence of the religious impulse on the decision-makers of the time is subject to dispute, it fit into the expansion of the Christian Zionist idea, namely that the restoration of a Jewish state in the territory of ancient Israel and its defence and preservation was part of God’s will for history.

Modern Christian Zionism comes as an outgrowth of two general theological schools of thought: covenantalism and dispensationalism. Covenantalism emphasizes the continuity of Old Testament covenants and
asserts that since God does not change, his promises to Old Testament Israel remain in effect. Dispensationalism on the other hand argues that Israel has a special role in the unfolding of biblical prophecy in the end times (International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, n.d.). While covenantalism is a common perspective shared by Christian Zionists stemming from mainline Reformed churches and popular in charismatic circles, it is common for critics of Christian Zionism to focus on the dispensationalist interpretation of Israel’s role given its influence on American Evangelicalism. A common concern among Christian Zionists is a relapse of Christian theology into what they term Replacement Theology, the teaching that biblical Israel has been replaced and no longer enjoys a special relationship with God.

While birthed in the United Kingdom, the dispensationalist movement in fundamentalist theology became far stronger in America in the early 1900s. It became popular as a result of the publication and dissemination of the Scofield reference Bible from the early 1900s and as a result of the foundation of several influential institutes and schools, such as Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas (Sizer 2004: 33-80). In the early 1970s, the Christian Zionist movement achieved spectacular notoriety and public importance in the wake of the publication of Hal Lindsey’s bestselling book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey 1970). Lindsey and a countless array of imitators and fellow-travelers have published popular pulp-analysis of international politics ever since.

Modern Christian Zionism is shaped by several basic assumptions about the world that serve to unite otherwise strongly contradictory theological perspectives on the prophetic passages of scripture. Dispensationalist proponents, who have what some would call a nihilistic attitude toward the politics of the Middle East, often unite with charismatic groups who are likely to resonate with the Jewish heritage of Christianity. Both see Palestine as the epicentre of a restored biblical kingdom. These groups tend to be united in their identification of biblical Israel with the modern state of Israel, in their maximal approach to Israeli sovereignty over the “holy land”, in an interest in the presumed way predictive prophecy relates to modern events, and in philo-Semitism in the form of “blessing Israel” through support of Israeli government actions as well as ongoing partnerships with Jewish people (Sizer 2004: 19, Ateek, Duaybis and Tobin, 2005: 51-53).
Christian Zionists are divided on many issues but an abiding pattern can be judged in works that are rooted in a Reformed, fundamentalist, or evangelical Protestant worldview. A common practice among Christian Zionists is to make reference to current events in juxtaposition to particular passages of scripture that appear to confirm a chiliasmic meaning to all that occurs in the world, most importantly in the Middle East—"reading back into Scripture subsequent events in history," according to critic Stephen Sizer (Sizer 2007: 108). Editorial and commentary programs such as the 700 Club and Jack Van Impe Presents bring together news articles and clips viewed through the lens of Christian Zionist eyes. Influential Christian Zionists have included televangelists John Hagee, the late Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, as well as organizations such as Christians United for Israel (CUFI) or the International Christian Embassy - Jerusalem (ICEJ). But the real strength of the movement is the breadth and diversity of those who hold its positions. Sizer remarks that Christian Zionist perceptions range "from individual Christian leaders whose denominations have no stated position on Zionism, to major international evangelical organizations that are unapologetically Christian Zionist." (Sizer 2007: 22) This diversity combines both Pentecostal and charismatic movements that see the restoration of Israel as a triumphalistic project of God as well as dispensationalists who recognize it as a sign of the end times.

Where it comes to the conceptualization of peace, both covenantal and dispensationalist Christian Zionism tend to take a relativistic attitude. The Christian Zionist perspective renders all events through a theological screen that sees conflict and violence as a part of a divine master plan. In the dispensationalist variant, conflict is often removed from day-to-day reality and viewed instead as epiphenomenal of unseen spiritual forces at work in the fulfillment of a pre-ordained great game. This distances the Christian Zionist both from the humanity of those involved in a conflict and from the reality of suffering and desirability of peace. In fact, the very idea of earthly peace is tainted by the interpretation of particular passages in prophetic scriptures that suggest that peace is temporary and fleeting, and likely to be false or a smokescreen for the pursuit of evil and vice. Such a structural understanding of the world leaves little room for the sort of compromises that would certainly be necessary to bring a one-state, two-state, or other sort of solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.
This ambivalence— if not deliberate opposition— toward peace was indicated by Lindsey as early as 1970, in the wake of the 1967 war. “Peace” is recoded to indicate both a spiritual and eschatological peace while the pursuit of temporal and earthly peace outside these confines is considered pyrrhic and self-defeating. Human efforts such as the intervention of international institutions, diplomats, or interested parties, are ruled irrelevant given the inexorable march of world history toward a messianic kingdom:

Men today vainly seek after peace while they reject and shut out of their lives the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. The name of Christ is not mentioned at the close of prayer in the United Nations... [T]he Bible teaches that lasting peace will come to the world only after Christ returns and sits upon the throne of David in Jerusalem and establishes his historic kingdom on earth for a thousand years (Revelation 20: 4-6). (Lindsey 1970: 170)

Such statements are echoed by popular teachers and commentators in the dispensational stream of fundamentalist theology in the United States. John F. Walvoord, before his death in 2002 a famed professor and exegete from Dallas Theological Seminary and doyen of dispensational theology, states flatly that “[t]hough Israel has a deep longing for peace, it will not be fulfilled until the return of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace who will usher in the millennial kingdom and bring peace to troubled Israel.” (Walvoord 1991: 319-20) For Lindsey, Walvoord and most other Christian Zionists, “lasting peace”, meaning eternal salvation and (eventually) life in an eschatological and millenarian golden age, is the only project worth pursuing.

To Lindsey and various representatives of the dispensationalist variant of Christian Zionism, any attempt to bring a peaceful end to the Arab-Israeli conflict is only likely to be evidence that a promised anti-Christ is behind the effort. A fundamental tenet of the dispensationalist school is that one of the marks of such a “man of sin” is the ability to bring a peaceful end to the various threats that the nation of Israel encounters. Writing ten years after the publication of his groundbreaking work, Lindsey went on to state that

a truce of sorts must be established sooner or later. Bible prophecy says a three year, six month “pseudo-peace” will be achieved by the
efforts of the false prophet of Israel and the anti-Christ, the leader of the revived Roman empire.
But the false peace will be shattered by an attack on Israel by combined Arab forces. (Lindsey 1980: 57)

Given that Christian Zionist literature tends to see all events that take place in the Middle East through the lens of an ongoing fulfillment of prophecy, the teaching that imminent peace forms part of a drama already written codes any and all efforts to achieve temporal peace. It overrides other moral imperatives that would otherwise gain universal assent among Christians. It also serves to demonize any attempt at a negotiated resolution of the conflict as a compromise of the basic premises of the faith.

John Hagee, founder of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and senior pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, is likely the most prominent standard-bearer of the Christian Zionist message in the United States today. He shares the antipathy that most in the camp feel toward compromise solutions in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Reflecting an uncritical acceptance of the Israeli policy that holds that Jerusalem is the “eternal and undivided capital” of the Israeli state, Hagee unequivocally states in his book Jerusalem Countdown that “Jerusalem is the heart of Israel. There are voices now calling for the sacred city to be shared as a part of the Roadmap for Peace in the Middle East. Let it be known to all men far and near, the city of Jerusalem is not up for negotiation with anyone at any time for any reason in the future.” (Hagee 2007: 85-6) The very idea of sharing and compromise, which might well be welcomed under Christian premises of living at peace with all other people and seeking the peace and well-being of all the residents of Jerusalem, are laid aside under the assumption that such a compromise is profane.

A negotiated solution runs afoul of many other Christian Zionist proponents under the assumption that any attempt at compromise must be viewed through the lens of past events and eschatological expectations. Joel Rosenberg, an American Christian of Jewish descent who has previously worked in campaigns for the Likud and Republican parties, affirms his support for the idea of peace couched in an assumption of future conflict. In his bestselling work entitled Epicenter: why the current rumblings in the Middle East will change your future, Rosenberg states that
I should note here that while I strongly support giving the Palestinians autonomy to govern themselves without interference from Israel in return for true peace and stability in the lands run by the Palestinians, I personally oppose the notion of the State of Israel giving away the ancient lands of Judea and Samaria in order to create a sovereign Palestinian state that could become a base camp for anti-Israel and anti-Western terrorism and that could form alliances with radical Islamic regimes like Iran...(Rosenberg 2008: 79)

Rosenberg’s support for Palestinian autonomy short of a two-state solution marks him as something of a moderate in Christian Zionist circles. However, his predictions for the future of Middle Eastern politics prominently feature a future Russian-Iranian axis that will aggress upon Israel. Compromise peace in the Middle East once again is coded amid the expectation of future war, meaning that a peace agreement between Israelis and Arabs is just as likely an attempt to weaken the Israeli state for a future conflict.

The pessimism that is presented by Christian Zionist authors about Middle East peace is infectious. It continues to lead many to disambiguate peace in its temporal and spiritual forms, degrading attempts at concluding a peace treaty between Israelis and Arabs while asserting that peace in this region (as in no other) requires direct divine intervention. At the close of his work entitled *Understanding the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Michael Rydelnik, a Christian scholar of Jewish Studies at the Moody Bible Institute writes that

In addressing end-times events, the Scriptures foretell two kinds of future peace, the false messiah’s peace, and the True Messiah’s peace... Nevertheless, nothing in the world has convinced me that we can or will ever bring lasting peace. Resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and ultimately world peace, does depend on Messiah Jesus. (Rydelnik 2004: 204-5)

This assumption that temporal peace treaties in the region of the Middle East are inherently inferior to perfectionistic and eschatological peace combine a sort of spiritual triumphalism with a temporal defeatism that indicates a church divorced from the world, a point that is frequently challenged by Christian and non-Christian critics alike, and serves as the starting point for Palestinian counter-narratives.
Peace with Justice? Sabeel and Palestinian Christian Liberation

It is widely held that North American evangelical and mainline churches have embraced the Christian Zionist narrative relatively uncritically over the past several decades. Indeed the perspective has become dominant in the American Christian community since the 1970s when the rise of Israeli power in the region confirmed the projections of the dispensationalists and gave new impetus to charismatic and reconstructionist theologies. Scholars of global Christianity have observed that an identification with Israel has spread to churches in the developing world as well (Jenkins 2002: 182). However, the globalization of world Christianity to favour non-Western voices has also provided new impetus for counternarratives arising from Arab and Palestinian Christian traditions.

To an extent this response is rooted in a Palestinian awakening that took place during the first intifada and the ensuing Oslo peace process. The emergence of a new Palestinian leadership in the late 1980s led to a strengthened ecumenical movement and an increasingly concerted effort to challenge Christian Zionist assertions about the way prophetic passages relate to the Arab-Israeli conflict. One sign of the coming of a Palestinian-led challenge was the establishment of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem under the leadership of Naim Stifan Ateek, an Anglican clergyman, in 1992. The center was established as a result of a conference hosted in Jerusalem in 1989 which featured several Western and Palestinian speakers. Since that time, Ateek and the Sabeel organization have deliberately targeted the Christian Zionist narrative through editorial work and activism.

Ateek laid down a mainstream Palestinian critique of Christian Zionism in his 1989 work *Justice and Only Justice: a Palestinian theology of liberation*. The book is a personal account of his struggle to make sense of his status as a Christian Palestinian citizen of Israel. As a means of contradicting the Christian Zionist defence of Israel and posture against a temporal peace, Ateek provides a correction that he describes as "Christocentric". What he means by this is that Old Testament passages interpreted literally and ahistorically by Christian Zionists should instead be understood through the lens of a modern interpretation of Jesus Christ’s message: “the Palestinian Christian, like every other Christian, begins with Christ and goes backward to the Old Testament and forward to the New Testament and beyond them.” (Ateek
Ateek’s theology assumes in fact that the prophetic and theonomic passages of the Old Testament that are celebrated by both dispensational and charismatic Christians in the West today are obviated by the New Testament and must be seen through his understanding of Jesus Christ’s message of peace and universal love.

This attitude is a novel hermeneutic that does not necessarily sit well with orthodox – not to mention Judeophile – Christian audiences. However, Ateek veers more closely to both liberal and evangelical orthodoxy when he calls Christians to peacemaking functions out of the tradition of the Eastern Church. “The fundamental Christian attitude toward conflict and war familiar to the Christians in the Middle East is that of Jesus – the way of nonviolence,” he states (Ateek 1989: 134) In Ateek’s vision, peace is restored to its place of importance in the Christian perspective, but conjoined strongly with a prophetic insistence upon peace with justice. In the context of Justice and Only Justice, this implies a two-state solution along the lines envisioned under the Declaration of Principles and the later Roadmap, with the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Elsewhere, he outlined some of the demands of peace from the Palestinian perspective: “As Palestinian Christians we needed to deal with the realities of hatred and bitterness and how these could be truly answered by forgiveness and love, but in a way that is based on truth and justice and that leads to real peace, not just to our silencing and surrender.” (Ateek, Ruether, and Ellis 1992: 5) For Ateek this translates into advocacy and pressure toward a positive peace that ensures justice for Palestinians, though not without some form of compromise on their part.

Increasingly over the past two decades, the work of Ateek and Sabeel has therefore meant both advocating for the Palestinian national cause and against the Christian Zionist perspective. In the wake of a conference deliberately aimed at countering Christian Zionism, Ateek published an edited collection of papers that represented both a Western critique of Christian Zionism and Palestinian reflections on occupation, peace, and the national struggle, mostly from the perspective of Christian Palestinians. The work is aimed most importantly at Western Christians in mainline denominations, where “the dangers of Christian Zionism have not been taken seriously”, and who are tempted by “certain false teachings based on the Bible that are a matter of life or death to fellow Christians in another part of the world.” (Ateek in Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2005: 16, 17). In addition to the active cultivation
of chapters of *Friends of Sabeel* in Western states such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, and Australia, *Sabeel* has sought out ways to confront Christian Zionists with alternative information on their visits to the Israeli state (Personal Interview 2008). In this they form the vanguard of a burgeoning community of Christians who argue against the Christian Zionist narrative, even among those who do not share the theological and political aims of the *Sabeel* organization.

Beyond the challenge to Christian Zionism, the message of *Sabeel* is of the construction of a means by which Christians may show solidarity with the Palestinian national cause in demanding peace with justice. Although Ateek himself is an Anglican canon, the organization deliberately identifies itself as an ecumenical group, the better to unite the various Christian churches that find a home in Israel-Palestine. The organization hosts women’s conferences, regular weekly youth meetings, Bible studies, and international partnership visits that all seek to put the message articulated by Ateek into practice. These activities are built upon the assumption that the Christian gospel is relevant to every day and tangible especially in the context of Palestine since Jesus Christ lived in the same location, also under occupation. In the words of Nora Karmi, one of *Sabeel’s* leading activists, “Every single issue becomes connected to what the scriptures are saying.” (Karmi 2008) Ateek also affirms that “it has become impossible to explore the question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ without first exploring ‘Who is my God?’ In other words, questions of God and neighbor have become intrinsically connected.” (Ateek 2008: 157) Context is extremely significant: in the same piece, Ateek goes on to argue that the theology introduced in the pre-exilic Levitical period has been replaced by a more expansive theology represented in the exilic writings of Ezekiel.

Palestinian Liberation Theology as enunciated and practiced by Ateek and *Sabeel* thus does take aim at the dualist distinction between spiritual and temporal peace articulated by the Christian Zionists. It applies a holistic understanding of peace that is rooted in the Christian message, indicating that peace must be associated with tangible attempts to right injustices on the earth. In this way it matches the theology of praxis that characterizes mainstream Liberation Theology that arose in the Latin American context from the late 1960s forward (for basic information on Liberation Theology, see Berryman 1987, Gutierrez 1973, and Tombs 2002). It combines the liberationist’s role of conscientization (consciousness-raising) with political
advocacy for the Palestinian cause, though to be fair this is rooted according to Ateek in a universal gospel that states that liberation is not national but directed at all people. It deliberately aims at including Jewish people in the process of peace-building, but primarily at the level of accepting the Israeli state’s role in victimizing the Palestinian people. For a just peace to move forward, redress of the injustices of the past is essential. If Jewish people are able to meet with Palestinians on the level of assuring justice, there can be a renewed partnership that creates the potential for a new society of equals.

**Peace and Reconciliation? Evangelical Visions**

While the Christian Zionist perspective represents a dualistic and dogmatic notion of the interpretation of prophetic scripture, the Liberation Theology presented by Naim Ateek and *Sabeel* relies upon a more liberal theology of praxis rooted in liberation theology and modern text-criticism. Christian Zionists are rooted in American fundamentalism and (frequently) in charismatic renewal movements. Palestinian Liberation Theology is embraced most significantly by the historic churches and the ecumenical movement in the Middle East. Neither fully voices the popular theology represented by modern day evangelicals, though each tugs at the hearts of Christians of all theological perspectives.

The historic dominance of Palestinian Christians in the Christian community of the territory of Israel-Palestine makes it easy to overlook modern developments in the Christian demographics of the region. Christian evangelicals in the state of Israel and the occupied territories today represent a binational group stemming from the presence of a Palestinian population living either as citizens or people living under occupation and the increasing growth of a small but vibrant Messianic Jewish (Jewish Christian) church. The conflict represents something very real and present in their daily lives but also something that divides one Christian from another. While most evangelical churches in the Holy Land reflect the geographic separation of Arabs and Jews and thereby tend to be all Jewish or all Arab, there are several congregations that bring together individuals from each culture. In order to survive and to maintain vital links and contacts with like-minded Christians around the world, the Evangelical churches in the Holy Land must seek
to walk a tightrope that will allow both communities to remain within the church. It is a feat that is often impossible to achieve.

Nevertheless, a variety of Christian evangelicals and partners within the mainstream Palestinian churches have sought to discover a third way to approach peace in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The result has been Musalaha, an initiative organized by Palestinian theologian and peace activist Salim Munayer. Munayer is a Palestinian citizen of Israel from the city of Lydda. He represents a modern style of Palestinian Christianity: he became an evangelical at a young age and pursued a Christian education in the United States prior to returning to his home. From the late 1980s, Munayer found himself teaching at the Bethlehem Bible College based on the main road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. He discovered that in spite of the increase in the number of Jewish converts to Christianity, Palestinian and Jewish Christians were unlikely to meet or to communicate. Natural hostilities from each side were combined with the fact that most Messianic Jews had wholly embraced the Christian Zionist perspective (Munayer 2008). What is more, the popularity of Palestinian Liberation Theology that insisted that social justice was the only place to start was likely to alienate Jewish people who felt that their concern for security was not taken seriously.

Rather than seek a solution in either an emphasis on eschatological hopes or to begin by a demand for social justice, Munayer suggested that Christians model a form of reconciliation based upon an “incarnational theology” that emphasizes the development of relationships (Munayer 2008). Incarnational theology argues, out of the Christian tradition, that Jesus Christ was God in human form, and that his presence on earth was designed to provide a living example to all believers. Munayer’s own thought is strongly rooted in the theology of Miroslav Volf, a Yale Theologian and specialist who focuses on the ways in which culture, ethics, and spirituality are intertwined (see, for example, Volf 1996: 2006).

Munayer argues that what Christians have to offer the Middle East is a notion of unity that transcends the ethnic boundaries that divide the two sides. He starts from the Christian position that the death of Jesus Christ was intended to reconcile all human beings to God. This example compels the followers to Jesus to “obey his commands for unity and to experience the fellowship and community of believers.” This form of unity is the key to the successful work of the church on earth (Munayer 2002: 82).
The programme for relationship-building championed by Musalaha is thus rooted in what is considered a strength of the Christian contribution, a platform that unifies people in spite of the real political conflicts that divide them. Lisa Loden, a Messianic Jew who has participated in the program, shares that there have been real obstacles to meeting Palestinians but that personal relationships act as a means by which fundamental disagreements can be shared and discussed. “First we had to build bridges of trust, and we did this by listening to each other’s stories.” (quoted in Fisher 2008: 61) Likewise, Munayer observes,

[a]s we founded Musalaha, we knew that we had to deal with [political and theological disagreements], but also understood that Musalaha had to find a safe forum where people could develop relationships, and then express, exchange, learn and debate the issues that divide us. Many wanted to deal with the issues right away without understanding the importance of the process: that these issues will be dealt with in proper time and manner, in the context of developed relationships (Munayer 2002: 83).

The process of developing relationships is thus rooted in the notion that the church operates as a model after the work of Jesus Christ, seeking to work out the notion of reconciliation on earth among all people, including those who happen to inhabit the Holy Land.

Evan Thomas, a Messianic Jew who has been active in the Musalaha work since the beginning, shares that the development of relationships does not necessarily bring fundamental change in the political attitudes of participants. In fact, the primary focus of the work of reconciliation pursued by Musalaha begins by creating an opportunity to make the political conflict and the theological interpretation secondary to relationships that are forged between human beings. Thomas argues that mere dialogue would be counterproductive if it did not involve the construction of relationships. “The key thing that God taught us right from the beginning was that we were not going to succeed on the basis of bright ideas or dialogue, and certainly not through conferences or seminars regarding our respective theologies about the land,” he states, but goes on to share that through such relationships dogmatic views were challenged in the process (quoted in Fisher 2008: 111-113). Incremental
changes in attitude came naturally out of the process of developing a spiritual understanding of the other side.

The work of Musalaha has proceeded from the initial attempts to bring together Christian believers from each side of the conflict, beginning in the early 1990s. However, in the past several years the mandate of Musalaha has broadened to include compatriots from other religious backgrounds. The original model for building relationships involved a “desert encounter”, in which both Israelis and Palestinians were removed from their environments and given the opportunity to build relationships in the stark environment of the desert. In a sense, the situation forces individuals to part from their rootedness in land and reference instead the others who occupy their environment. Recent desert encounters have generally been held in the Wadi Rum area of Jordan. Participants are recruited from the various communities of the Palestinian territories and contacts in Israel.

Conclusions

Religion features significantly in the framing of conflict in the context of the Middle East. While the Arab-Israeli conflict may be easily reduced to a conflict between Jewish and Muslim peoples over the sacred geography of the Holy Land, this would ignore the role that Christians play both domestically and internationally in contributing to popular conceptions of peace and conflict in the region. In this paper, I have highlighted the role that the Christian Zionist perspective plays in constructing Christian attitudes toward peace. This perspective is influential in both North American and global Christianity and presents a political-theological concern for Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land, for whom it can prove alienating and enervating. However, Palestinian Christians have presented alternative narratives of peace in an attempt to challenge the Christian Zionist perspective, in the process giving their minority community a new status and contributing to the renewal of Palestinian Christian interest in their own faith.

Traditional interpretations provided by the Christian Zionist movement give little interest to the conclusion of peace, viewing it either as a “false peace”, evidence of a coming apocalypse, or as appeasement of hostile forces. Zero-sum thinking as well as assertions about the place of Christians in the
unfolding divine plan dominates this view, leading Christian Zionists toward unilateral support of the Israeli state and dismissal of Palestinian interests or rights. However, modern critics of Christian Zionism coming from both liberal and evangelical camps argue that Christians are equally called to peacemaking, whether as a means of upholding social justice (as highlighted by Naim Ateek and Sabeel) or as a way of modeling the reconciliation ministry of Jesus Christ before their compatriots (as championed by Salim Munayer and Musalaha). It is no accident that such perspectives are championed by indigenous Arab (and in some cases Jewish) Christians and resonate with their compatriots. Such models seek to move beyond objectifying the actors involved in a conflict in a way that separates theology from the players on the ground. The contextual movement displayed among these religious actors demonstrates that actors in the developing world are increasingly seeking to determine the broader socio-political contours of Christian social teaching (as suggested by Jenkins, for example, in Jenkins 2006).

In sum, this study reveals the diversity of reflections that religion may have in regard to a subject even as fraught and controversial as the Middle East conflict. These findings should be instructive to any assessment of the impact that religion has on this conflict, as problematic a role as religion appears to play. It would follow that other religious perspectives are as diverse and prone to critique and application as the Christian worldview: it therefore behooves the scholar and casual observer to realize the inherent diversity of religious views and forms, and their malleability over time. Indeed, the premise of the work of evangelicals such as Salim Munayer is founded on the assumption that feelings and beliefs, even those of a religious sort, change over time as one is confronted with the existence of the Other.

The new assertiveness demonstrated among Palestinian Christians such as Ateek and Munayer over the past two decades is evidence that in spite of the obvious obstacles, Arab Christians remain relevant and even potentially transformative actors in their own societies and at the global level. As politics in the Middle East continue to reflect the widespread changes taking place during the “Arab Spring”, and with gathering frustration over the inability to come to a negotiated resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the work of such civil actors will continue to be relevant.

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