

Palestinian Lutherans in Today's War Zone (Continuation of ThTh #124)

Colleagues:

Half a dozen, maybe more, responses (some of them lengthy pieces) have come my way since last week's posting about Christians Palestinians. I'd like to send them all your way, especially the two coming from Jewish authors who speak out for the Palestinians in their ironic David/Goliath dilemma with Israel, but it's too much. So I've selected two others—one quite short, the other perhaps 3 pages—to pass on as ThTh 125.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. FIRST ONE is from our friend Munib A. Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and Jerusalem [ELCJ].

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I send you today this attachment which is self-explanatory.

I believe that it is now time for more prayer and sanity. On behalf of the ELCJ, I do appeal to you to assign Sunday, November 5th, 2000 as Sunday for special prayers, solidarity and support for the Christian witness and mission of the ELCJ and for the children who are living in horror and fear in our country, and also for comprehensive just, lasting peace in the land of the resurrection.

I appeal to you that your churches and respective congregations can act upon my appeal.

Your Brother in Christ,

Bishop Munib A. Younan

The Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem

[It is not completely clear in the email transmission, but I think what follows here is "this attachment" referred to in the bishop's message above. Ed]

Here is the name and address of the US-based "Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage" to which contributions for the work of the ELCJ can be sent, for which also contribution forms will be issued which can be submitted for recognition as tax-deductible contributions by the US IRS. The address:

Rev. Dr. Bassam. J. Abdallah

Association of Lutherans of Arab and Middle Eastern Heritage

6705 Hohman Ave.

Hammond, IN 46324

Rev. Bassem Abdallah has indicated that checks for the ELCJ and its work should be made out to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, earmarked "ELCJ Level II".

II. SECOND ONE comes from Paul Hoffman, rostered ELCA pastor, now retired from a life-long career in overseas ministry—first with the Luth. World Federation in Geneva, then missionary prof in Ethiopia, then a couple other assignments, and for his last 16 years liaison for the Berliner Mission Society with Lutherans in the Middle East. From his twice-a-year trips to Israel/Palestine Paul

not only knows everyone in the ELCJ and many local Muslims and Israelis too, but also has a unique understanding on what's going on—as you will see below. Paul and I met as seminary students 50 years ago, he attending the LCA sem in Philadelphia and I the LCMS sem in St. Louis. We've stayed in touch over the half century. Our last longer time together was in 1995 as guest profs in Ethiopia. Most recently Paul and his wife (Lu)Ise were leaders for a group of us on a two week pilgrimage with Palestinian Lutherans at Christmastime 1998. The Hoffmans live in Berlin. Paul's an American citizen, Ise German. Paul is a native of Buffalo, New York, and that's his legal residence.

Date: October 30, 2000

From: Paul E. Hoffman

Topic: On the Election and the Israel/Palestine Issue

Dear Ed and Marie,

I send off my absentee ballot tomorrow and will be voting in New York State for Gore/Lieberman – and for Hilary, too. Of course, I'm not sure about Gore or Lieberman on the Israel/Palestine question. Just as I was not sure about Carter, a Southern Baptist of Evangelical persuasion. On the same question I was pleased about Bush Senior and James Baker, and have been much disappointed and frustrated by the Clinton/Albright support for Barak at and after Camp David II. (I have been a reluctant and critical supporter of the Oslo/Washington "peace process".)

Traditionally, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, Orthodox Jews – both in Israel and the States – were, in the vast majority, anti-Zionists, opposed on theological grounds to the Zionist view of history which demanded discarding a messianic view of the redemption of

Israel (the people) by the promised messiah in favor of the idea of "auto-redemption", i.e. seeing the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine not as something which the messiah would bring about, but as a political task for Jews to work at, and the fulfillment of the visions of the prophets not as a dream, but as a political goal to be achieved by political – and if necessary military – means. Secular Zionists proclaimed, in other words, "self-redemption" to be brought about by the Zionist movement in collaboration with one or the other of the Great (colonial-imperialist) Powers. Orthodoxy was opposed to the whole idea – on pious, religious grounds. But so were Reform or liberal Jews in America at the time.

At the establishment of the State, Ben Gurion and his secularist-socialist Zionists made every effort – verbally and politically – to bring the Orthodox in Israel and outside Israel, as well as Reform Jews in the US into acceptance of the State. Most Orthodox in America and Israel now saw in the creation of the State of Israel hope of the dawning of the messianic age, just as most Conservative Evangelicals, despite criticism of the ideology and policies of the secular, socialist Jewish state, nevertheless saw the in-gathering of the Jews in the Land of Promise as the necessary preparation for the Return of Christ and either the establishment of the Thousand-Year Reign or the Battle of Armageddon against the Evil Empire (depending on what kind of a millennialist you were).

After the Six-Day-War of 1967 and the "miraculous" salvation of Israel from the combined enmity of the Arab States and, with that victory, the establishment of Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem and the Temple

Mount and all Judea and Samaria, religious support among Orthodox Jews and Conservative Evangelical Christians jumped exponentially. Only a small minority of the Ultra-Orthodox continued to reject all support for Israel on religious-theological grounds (they even explicitly supported Arafat and the PLO – up till now!). Religious Zionism spread among the Orthodox Jews of America. But after the disaster of the invasion of Lebanon, the indiscriminate bombardment of Beirut and the massacres in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in 1982, some Orthodox Jews in Israel and in the US joined the “Peace Now” movement. In other words, I know that there is a variety of political opinion among Orthodox Jews, both in Israel and in the USA, as there is also among Reform and Conservative Jews.

Lieberman’s being an Orthodox Jew does not bother me in regard to the Israel/Palestine question! After all, he is a supporter of the (now defunct) American backed “peace process”. What bothers me is the onesidedness of America’s role in that process. I favor a more even-handed approach which would see complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the territories occupied in 1967, including the Arab Palestinian communities of East Jerusalem, some sort of internationally guaranteed political division and shared responsibility for the Old City which would lead to a new Status Quo agreement laying down the rights of Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Old City and the Holy Places in the Land, and the establishment of a Palestinian state with defined boundaries alongside of and recognized by Israel. ETC. (Arab refugees would be allowed to return to Palestine—if not to Israel—and be compensated for properties confiscated by Israel. Indemnity payments would be made

to Palestine by Israel. Israeli settlements would be dismantled as such, Jews being given the right to continue to live in the Land as citizens of Palestine or be allowed to be resettled in Israel, whichever they chose. The settlements that remained would be ethnically and religiously mixed and unarmed.)

Perhaps because he is a believing Jew, Lieberman might actually seek to be fair in the Palestine/Israel question. The problem is not Jewishness but nationalism (religious or secular) blinded to the legitimate rights of others (Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Hisbollah being the real problem on the other side, not the PLO.)

What bothers me about a possible Republican administration at the present time is my memory of the Reagan administration, Reagan addressing the Conservative Evangelicals and identifying the then Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" (and getting resounding applause!). It was Reagan also who redefined the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories no longer as "illegal" (according to UN standards of international legitimacy), but merely "impediments to peace" (which did not stop any of the Israeli governments since then from establishing new settlements and expanding those that already existed), financing these in part with American credits aimed at strengthening Israeli "security" – which sounds legitimate enough, while covering a multitude of political sins.

What bothers me about George W. is his lack of historical and geographical knowledge and seeing the world solely in terms of "American (economic and military) interests" (or do I have this wrong?). I'm afraid that he personally is no match for the American Military-Industrial-Petroleum

Complex. And Cheney bothers me even more! Prof. C. Rice (a conservative Black American) who is foreign policy advisor to the Bush campaign gives me some degree of hope regarding Europe and America, but not regarding the Middle East, though her independence of analysis – if she were to become successor to Albright – might well lead, in the end, to a helpful new start toward a more even-handed and genuine peace process, the US pressuring Israel to meet legitimate Palestinian demands and allowing Palestinian recourse to the UN if such legitimate demands are not met .

Meanwhile the situation is getting worse, the uprising, the Second Intifada, the Intifada for the Harem es Sharif, is continuing, the Israeli army is using live ammunition and rubber-coated lethal bullets, rockets and artillery not only against snipers but against Arab Palestinian houses and buildings – also in the Christian towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, where we have Evangelical Lutheran congregations and schools, including TALITHA KUMI.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, including Israeli recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian claims to a just share of everything connected with the Land of Promise. Compromise there must be, but a compromise that is based on equality and justice and the sharing of the Land and the City, equally recognizing the limits to attempts to bring about, or lay a foundation for, a “redemptive” apocalypse.

I believe a common Jewish, Christian and Muslim “apocalyptic vision” for Jerusalem and the Land is a basis for a secular peace: Symbol for such a peace is the walled-in “Golden Gate” in the eastern wall of the Old

City. The 16th century Turkish Sultan and re-builder of the walls of Jerusalem, Suleiman "the Magnificent," made sure that the Golden Gate for direct access to the Temple Mount (the Harem es Sharif) remained walled-in. For him, Issa the Messiah at his return will be the one to open the Golden Gate. For Christians, we should leave it to Jesus to establish his reign on earth (including building a Third Temple or not), and refuse support for any pre-millennialist political imperialism.

"Christian Zionism" – so rampant in American Evangelicalism – is both an ethical and political catastrophe (you can see that I am an anti-chiliast or "anti-millennialist" – that's maybe from my Lutheran confessional background). Religious, Orthodox Jews should remember that the rabbis until 1967 – until Israel's victory in the 1967 war led to the spread of "political enthusiasm" (what Luther called "Schwarmerei") among them – viewed the stepping on to the Temple Mount anywhere by Jews as a sacrilege – and could leave not only the establishment of a Jewish State, but also Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount and the building of a Third Temple, if it be so, to the coming Messiah. Ariel Sharon is not an Orthodox Jew, he's a right-wing, secular, nationalist Revisionist (like the mentor of Likud, Vladimir Yabotinski). His mounting the Temple area was assertion of continuing, "eternal" Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, an attempt to overthrow the partial compromises that Barak was willing to make in regard to Jerusalem.

The serious flaw at Camp David II was evidently the impasse over Jerusalem which was linked to putting on ice implementation of agreements reached thus far.

Common to all three pious, religious attitudes in the past – prior to the rise of redemptionist secular political ideology – was refusal to bring about an apocalypse now. In dialogue with both Jews and Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis, Christians (Americans or otherwise) should point out the political virtue of Israeli Jewish sovereignty over the Jewish Quarter and the Western (“Wailing”) Wall and Muslim Palestinian-Jordanian sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Since Christ will come indeed without even our prayer – even though we pray “thy kingdom come” – we can leave it to him to open the Golden Gate, build the Third Temple or whatever. The messiah at his coming will redeem Israel, even if Jerusalem and the Land, for the sake of peace, are divided and Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims and Christians and Jews, all are given their rights – within agreed upon limits for each – in the Land of Promise. Such a worldly peace will neither be the Millennium nor the precondition for Christ’s Return, nor will it prevent Christ’s Second Coming. Even after the creation of the State of Israel we look forward to the coming Kingdom, and in the meantime pray for the peace of the city.

Noting the pent-up frustrations of an Arab Palestinian population enduring over 33 years of Israeli occupation and Israeli need for peace and security, pray for an end to the self-sacrifice and the seeking after political and religious martyrdom by Arab young men, but also to an end to the military slaughter of largely stone-throwing youths by a superior Israeli armed force. Pray that Christians remain in the land to raise a voice for an internationally brokered negotiated Palestinian-Israeli peace. Pray for political acumen and moral vision toward a lasting peace with justice in Palestine/Israel for

*whoever gets elected to the presidency of the US on
November 7th.*