

Challenging Religious
Extremism

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The Middle East, where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated, still stands out as the area of the world with the highest levels of social, religious, and political hostilities that involve religion. There is a proliferation of religious extremism, and it has been spreading beyond this area.

In this booklet, I will be addressing the menacing phenomenon of religious extremism.

What is a religious extremist? A religious extremist is a person who holds radical or fanatical religious views. These beliefs become alarming and dangerous when they are put into action. Religious extremists have different religious labels, but they share the same basic mentality and mindset. They are often very aggressive, seeking to impose their views on other people or groups, and often preach intolerance against all who disagree with their viewpoints.

Religious extremism has manifested itself in various ways and degrees, and at different historical times, in all the three monotheistic religions. Religion should lead us closer to the one holy God who is good and gracious, but when any religion makes exclusive claims on God, it drives us apart and away from each other. We are supposed to believe in the God of love and compassion, the God of justice and truth, the God of forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet we find ourselves farther away from this God. Religion and our worship of God are supposed to make us more human and accepting of one another. Yet religious extremists, due to their exclusive beliefs and behavior, make a mockery of this image of God. They

¹ Sermon given by Rev. Naim Ateek at St. Catherine Nativity Church in Bethlehem at the opening worship of Sabeel's 10th International Conference, March 7, 2017.

have contaminated and polluted religion. By so doing, they have dehumanized their fellow human beings as well as themselves.

Let us look briefly at religious extremism.

Muslim Extremists

I believe that the case of militant and extremist Muslims has become widely exposed and well known, but I know Muslims who are bewildered and even ashamed of the crimes of ISIS/Da`ish.² These extremists use exclusive Quranic texts to kill their own brothers and sisters in the faith as well as people of other religions. A case in point is what happened in Al-Arish, in Sinai, Egypt in 2017 where Coptic Christians were harassed and killed by Muslim extremists. The word ‘religion’ has become repulsive. Some Muslims are speaking out against Islamic extremists, and their lives have been threatened. Many Muslims have fled the Middle East for fear of ISIS. Some have given up on religion and turned secular. Religion has been debased and degraded for many good people.

Israeli Jewish Settlers

What is less known and exposed are the Israeli Jewish settler extremists. They have been cleverly hidden from many people in the west, especially in the United States. These extremists are no longer a fringe group in the Israeli society. Some are ministers in the rightwing government in Israel. They dictate government

2 The Islamic State, or ISIS, is a militant organization that emerged as an offshoot of al Qaeda in 2014. It quickly took control of large parts of Iraq and Syria, raising its black flag in victory and declaring the creation of a caliphate and imposing strict Islamic rule. The group is sometimes also referred to as ISIL — for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — or by its Arabic acronym, Daesh.

policies that are extremely vicious against the Palestinian people. The Palestinians have little recourse to the rule of law. By and large, the Israeli courts and the judges have been in the service of the settlers and most of the verdicts are in their favor. The extremist settlers have a free hand and seem to be unstoppable. They are motivated and inspired by their religious sacred books, not only the Torah but the Talmud and the Halakha.

These settlers begin with a major premise that God has given all the land of Palestine to Jews and that the Arabs/Palestinians living on the land are thieves who have stolen the land. Therefore, they believe that it is God's will to liberate the land from the Palestinians. When they build settlements on confiscated Palestinian land, it is not an act of stealing; rather, they believe they are redeeming and sanctifying the land. They are simply transferring the land from the satanic to the divine sphere, and the use of force is permitted wherever and whenever necessary. They believe they are doing God's work. They believe that God is with them whenever, in God's name, they kill Palestinians.³

There are some Israeli and American Jews (as well as Jews of other countries) who are disturbed by what is happening. Some are speaking out against these extremists, but the majority of Israeli Jews are silent.

Frankly speaking, I see many similarities between extremist Muslims, like Da'ish/ISIS, and Israeli Jewish religious settlers. They both have the same mindset, and both share similar racist religious laws.

3 See Allan C. Brownfield, "It Is Time to Confront the Exclusionary Ethnocentrism in Jewish Sacred Literature," *Issues* (Winter 2000): 10.

Western Christian Extremists

Christian extremism expresses itself, to a large extent, in Christian Zionist ideology that usually has been translated into political decisions and actions. It continues to have dire consequences on the life and future of our Palestinian people, the indigenous people of this land, Palestine and Israel.

In fact, western Christian Zionists must share responsibility for the creation of Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel. One of the closest friends of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, was an Anglican priest by the name of William Hechler. Rev. Hechler was instrumental in inspiring and educating Herzl on those passages of the Bible that, he believed, call for the return of Jews to Palestine in fulfillment of prophecy.

There are western Christians who are sympathetic to the Palestinians but still believe that the land of Palestine was given by God to the Jewish people. The biblical texts they use reflect a tribal and exclusive understanding of God. These texts have been annulled and transcended by later prophetic writing within the Old Testament itself, and most certainly by the New Testament. Such biblical texts have become theologically redundant. God is the God of truth and justice and wills justice for the oppressed.⁴

Jesus Defines Religious Extremism

In my study of the gospels, I have always felt that the best definition of religious extremism and fundamentalism was given by

⁴ See Naim Ateek, "Development of Religious Thought in the Old Testament" in *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017) 47-82 for further discussion of this topic.

Jesus himself.

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so, they are offering worship to God” (16:1-3).

The words in John’s Gospel reflect the negative friction and struggle between the Jewish and the Christian communities at the end of the first century. The recorded words of Jesus were a great encouragement to the believers during their persecution. In effect, Jesus is saying: you will be persecuted and even killed by religious people who think that by killing you, they are doing God’s will.

Saul of Tarsus, a Religious Extremist

A case in point, in the book of Acts is the story of Saul of Tarsus who later became Paul. In today’s language, Saul was a religious extremist. Acts 9:1 describes Saul as “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” Out of his religious zeal, he rounded up and persecuted followers of Jesus and approved of the stoning to death of Stephen, one of the young Christian converts (Acts 7:54, 58; 8:1).

The story of Saul, the religious extremist, and his conversion is part of Christian history. Certainly, our three religions can share stories of how their adherents were persecuted at the hands of extremists of another religion. Oftentimes, some of the worst religious persecutions happened from within the same religion. As examples, one can point to wars between Catholics and Protestants within Christianity; Sunnis and Shias within Islam; Haredim and secular

Jews within Judaism.

We need to recognize that our religious histories are full of crimes committed against each other, and tragically, western Christians also bear responsibility for atrocities against other religions. The most striking examples are the Crusades and western Christian anti-Semitism. The basic truth is that none of us is innocent. All of us have sinned against God and neighbor. We need to stand before God in humility and repentance.

When I reflect on religious extremism, I wonder: Is the crisis brought about by religious extremism the result of faulty interpretations of religious sacred texts, or is it in the content and substance of those texts? This is one of the most basic theological problems in the Bible. Do we have the courage to say that the problem is in the text itself that reflects a violent God? Such texts could not have been inspired by a good, loving, merciful, and compassionate God. Similarly, the texts in Numbers 33:51-53 and Deuteronomy 7:1-3 that speak about driving out the indigenous people of the land and killing them cannot be inspired by the good and loving God, but rather by a tribal human mindset. It is human blindness that refuses to see that the authentic God of the Bible is the loving, merciful, and compassionate God who requires of us to do justice and to live in humility and peace with one another.

Finally, what are the antidotes to the malaise of religious extremism? I would like to suggest a simple exercise. Every religion needs to identify what constitutes the heart of its religious faith as well as the core of its religious and spiritual values. This exercise must be done not only by religious people, but by laity, men and women, whether practicing their religion or not. How do ordinary people understand and articulate the core of their religious faith? How do

ordinary people understand God? How do they regard their neighbor? Can people produce a criterion that can help them test and measure their behavior in light of the core values of their religion?

It is my belief that love is the criterion that can help us measure our religion, beliefs, faith, and behavior.

Let me end with two quotations that are an antidote to religious extremism.

First: After his conversion, Saul of Tarsus became known as Paul. In his letter to the Church at Corinth he wrote:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body (to be burned) so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Love is the antidote. Love trumps faith. Love trumps knowledge. Love trumps martyrdom.

This was the revolution which Jesus Christ accomplished. Indeed, Jesus was brought up in a religious home in Nazareth and was taught to love God and to obey the religious laws. But later Jesus realized that under the façade of religiosity was a deep-seated hypocrisy and racism that cannot belong to authentic religious faith.⁵ Authentic religious faith rejects any tribal, exclusive, and

5 Read the account of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, found in Luke 4:16-30.

nationalist understanding of God. It rejects bigotry and racism. Authentic religious faith sees God as the God of all people. It sees God's love and mercy embracing all people with no exceptions.

Second: Jesus Christ is the source. He has given us the antidote of love for healing our religious extremism:

You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? ... (Matthew 5: 43-46)

The antidote to the malaise of religious extremism is love. It is left to us to translate love into a strategy of action that can work in each of our various cultures. This is our wakeup call. We, Muslims, Christians and Jews, must take a good look at our religions and measure them against the demand of love of God and love of our neighbor. This is the challenge that confronts us all.

When Religion Becomes Part of the Problem⁶

There are two events in the evolution of religious Zionism that I would consider as turning points that have led the government of Israel into a decisive rightwing trajectory. The first took place on February 25, 1994, when Baruch Goldstein, an American born Jew and medical doctor, went into the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron with a machine gun and fired at Muslims while at prayer, killing 29 worshippers and injuring dozens more. Goldstein was apprehended by Muslim worshippers and killed, but he was praised by fellow extremist settlers as a martyr. His gravesite became a pilgrimage site for Jewish extremists.

The second event took place 10 months later, on November 4, 1995, when Yigal Amir, a young Jewish religious Zionist, assassinated the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Amir was opposed to Rabin's peace initiative, particularly the signing of the Oslo Accords which included Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. For Amir, this act would deny Jews their biblical heritage which they had reclaimed by establishing settlements. Amir had come to believe that Rabin, by accepting Oslo, was endangering Jewish lives.

For me, both these tragic events indicated a new trajectory for the religious extremists in Israel. They reflected a Zionist mindset that expressed itself in the negation and denial of the rights of the Palestinians to the land. Goldstein had taken an oath as a physician "to maintain the utmost respect for human life," but what he did was a betrayal of his solemn oath. With his deep animosity and loathing of Palestinian Muslims and their religion, he degraded himself to the level of a murderer. His crime also reflected a theology

6 A lecture given by Rev. Naim Ateek in Des Moines, Iowa on October 29, 2017.

of a god that is a bigot and a xenophobe. Tragically, it reflected a theology of the other which is in line with some of the exclusive texts in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Torah. It seems to me that this philosophy and theology continues to inspire today's religious extremist settlers. He believed that the Palestinians, in God's eyes, were dispensable and he was commanded to kill them.

According to Deuteronomy 7:2, "... when the Lord your God gives them [the people of the Land of Canaan] over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy."

For Yigal Amir, the assassination of his state's prime minister was meant to prevent any possibility on the part of the government of Israel of a compromise in giving back any of the land. Rabin, as a secular Jew, represented for Amir the epitome of sacrilegious behavior. The assassination was also meant to be a warning to Israeli leaders. Anyone who dared to even think or entertain the idea of sharing any of the land of Israel with the Palestinians would meet a similar fate.

What Goldstein and Amir did has become a template for the policies and action of settlers and has impacted the policies and strategies of the successive rightwing Likud governments.

At the same time, Palestinian resistance has been growing. The level of frustration among Palestinian youth has also grown, and with no hope in sight, they have been tragically, desperately, and unwisely committing atrocities against innocent Israelis.

Almost every week a Palestinian is killed under the pretense of trying to stab a soldier or use their car to run over an Israeli Jew.

Sometimes these allegations are true while other times false. Many innocent young men and women have been killed, accused or suspected of stabbing a Jewish person. There is no attempt to wound them; the Israeli soldiers are trained to shoot to kill, with no thorough or independent investigation to follow.

Israeli extremist settlers have taken the law into their own hands with “price tag attacks”⁷ which extract a price for any government effort to limit Jewish settlements on the West Bank. In 2015, the torching and defacing of the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes in Tabgha, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, was dubbed “price tag” with graffiti denouncing Christian idol worship. Rabbi Yisrael Ariel, an extremist rabbi, classifies Christians and Muslims as “idol worshippers.” Another Jewish extremist, Bentzi Gopstein, has publicly called for the burning of churches.⁸ Israeli police have not charged Gopstein over the incident, although Israeli law prohibits incitement to racism.

Many of these religious settlers, over the years, have joined the army and have come to occupy key positions. Most of them are committed to destroying the Palestinians and show no qualms

7 Since 2008, there have been repeated attacks carried out by extremist Israeli Jews against Palestinians. These attacks are frequently labeled “price tag” incidents. The price tag attack policy, also sometimes referred to as “mutual responsibility,” is the name originally given to the attacks and acts of vandalism committed primarily in the occupied West Bank by Israeli Jewish fundamentalist settler youths against Palestinian Arabs, left-wing Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, Christians, and Israeli security forces. The youths officially claim that the acts are committed to “exact a price from local Palestinians or from the Israeli security forces for any action taken against their settlement enterprise.” See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Price_tag_attack_policy.

8 “Radical Jewish group’s head advocates burning churches,” *Times of Israel*, August 6, 2015.

about killing them.

The reason I am focusing on these fundamentalists is not because there are no extremists among Christians or Muslims, but because today, in Israel, these extremists are in control. They have become leaders and many of them are ministers in the Israeli government.⁹ They are in positions of authority and power, and they show and practice their racism, and it is frightening. They show total disregard for international law and negate Palestinians' rights to the land.

Many of these extremist religious settlers have outgrown and gone beyond Zionism. There has been a drastic change in the ideology that inspires them. For many years, Jewish Zionists had been motivated by the ideology of Zionism, but their Zionist zealotry has morphed into religious zealotry. Now they are motivated by the Torah and by their Jewish religious traditions. Many of them consider Zionism a stage that was necessary, or that God used, to bring Jews back to the land. Zionism is passé and is no longer needed. They want to live according to God's law as written in the Torah and the Halakha (Jewish law), and equally by some of the Jewish sages and teachers of the past as well as the present. One of their favorites is Maimonides, a Jewish medieval philosopher.

These religious extremists are not interested in peace with the Palestinians. They have reversed the narrative. According to these Jewish religious nationalists, it is the Palestinians who are considered as thieves and robbers. It is the Palestinians who have stolen the land from the Jewish people and must be thrown out of the country.

From their perspective, they are taking their land back; they are redeeming it and sanctifying it. Whenever they confiscate

9 See Appendices for examples.

Palestinian land for building settlements or strip the Palestinians of their homes, they believe that they are not stealing the land, but are transferring it from the satanic to the divine sphere. They believe that it is permitted to lie and to falsify documents and even use force because their motive is righteous. In fact, the Halakha, Jewish law, permits Jews to rob non-Jews, especially when Jews are stronger than the non-Jews.¹⁰

Many of these fundamentalist rabbis have continually reiterated that Jews who killed Arabs should not be punished.” Rabbi Ariel states, “A Jew who killed a non-Jew is exempt from human judgment and has not violated the [religious] prohibition of murder.”¹¹ For example, when an Israeli soldier was indicted for killing a Palestinian and the court sentenced him to a year and a half in jail, there were large demonstrations by religious extremists against his indictment. They protested the jail sentence although it was only for one and a half years. According to Jewish religious law what he did was not murder.

“The Talmud states that ... two contrary types of souls exist [in the world], a non-Jewish soul comes from the satanic spheres, while the Jewish soul stems from holiness ... Rabbi Kook¹² has said that “The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews ... is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and souls of cattle.”¹³

10 Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*. Pluto Press, 1999.

11 See Allan C. Brownfield, “It Is Time to Confront the Exclusionary Ethnocentrism in Jewish Sacred Literature,” *Issues* (Winter 2000): 10

12 Chief Rabbi of Palestine in the 1920’s and revered as the father of messianic tendency of Jewish fundamentalism.

13 Shahak and Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*.

A Tangible Example

As a living example of the drastic changes that took place with Prime Minister Netanyahu's rightwing government¹⁴ and the increasing unruly behavior of the extremist settlers and its general impact on our people, the Palestinians, I would like to focus for a moment on Betzalel Smotrich, the former Deputy Knesset speaker.¹⁵

Most secular Israelis know three things about Smotrich:

1. His wife was quoted as saying that she did not want to give birth in the same hospital ward alongside an Arab¹⁶ woman.
2. Smotrich considers Reform Judaism a "fake religion." The largest Jewish denomination in the United States is Reform Judaism. It is not officially recognized in Israel.
3. Smotrich considers himself a "proud homophobe," and has been described as a bizarre, racist, homophobic extremist. He also has a plan to resolve the Palestine/Israel conflict which he has dubbed "the subjugation plan." Under this plan, he is ready to give the Palestinians three choices:
 1. To leave the country
 2. To fight against Israel and be destroyed mercilessly
 3. To accept living under Israeli rule with the status of "resident alien." This would mean that Palestinians would

14 Netanyahu was Prime Minister of Israel from 1996 to 1999 and again from 2009 to 2021.

15 Smotrich, an Israeli lawyer and politician, is the leader of the Religious Zionist Party, having previously served as a Knesset member for Yamina.

16 The state of Israel has removed the word "Palestinians" and replaced it with "Arabs of the state of Israel."

have no political or voting rights and would always have an inferior status.¹⁷

The term “resident alien” (in Hebrew, Ger Toshav) is not his creation but is found in the Torah, Leviticus 19:33. I have done quite a bit of research on the question of Ger Toshav and I have tried to discuss it more thoroughly by contrasting the understanding of Ger Toshav in the Torah with the prophet Ezekiel’s description in Ezekiel 47.¹⁸ The problem is that religious Jews believe that what is written in the Torah is more authoritative than the writings of the prophets. Although Leviticus expresses differences between the native born and the alien with the alien being “less equal,” Ezekiel pronounces a new understanding of the Ger Toshav and gives them total equality. Old Testament scholars tell us that it is possible that both the Torah and Ezekiel were finalized during the period of the Exile, but they reflect two different theological strands. The former continued to be more exclusive theologically while the latter, the Ezekiel text, reflects a movement toward the inclusive. Ezekiel, in fact, was critiquing the Leviticus text and replacing it with a commandment from God for total equality among all the people of the land.¹⁹ Smotrich is emphasizing the Leviticus text because he refuses to believe that all people are equal before God. He believes that the Palestinians are inferior.

Another important point about Smotrich’s subjugation plan is that it is, in fact, not original with him. He is referencing the midrash²⁰

17 Carlo Strenger, “Is Bezalel Smotrich the Future of Israel?” *Haaretz* (December 12, 2016). See Appendix I.

18 Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation; The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (NY: Orbis, 2017) 60-68.

19 Ibid.

20 A midrash is an ancient commentary on texts in the Torah.

of the Book of Joshua. The midrash says that Joshua sent letters to the people of Canaan with the three choices – to leave, to fight, or to submit and live as inferior subjects. Rabbi Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher in medieval Judaism, and much loved and listened to by many of the extremist settlers, wrote that if the people decide to stay under Jewish rule, “... they should be despised and lowly, and not raise their heads in Israel.”²¹ If they resist, “not a soul must be left among them.” This is the subjugation plan of Bezalel Smotrich.

So, what is happening in Israel where most of the population are supposed to be secular?²² Carlo Strenger writes, “An ever-growing part of Israelis drifts towards this religious form of ultra-nationalism that portrays Jews as superior, chosen people with God-given rights that trump simple, man-made notions like human rights and gender equality.”²³

Smotrich has a well-defined world view: “All of the greater land of Israel belongs to the Jews by virtue of God’s decree. No human-made law can compete with God’s will.” Israel, therefore, must annex all of the West Bank, aborting any Palestinian hope for a

21 Allan C. Brownfield, “It Is Time to Confront the Exclusionary Ethnocentrism in Jewish Sacred Literature,” *Issues* (Winter 2000) 8. Maimonides had written that a non-Jew permitted to reside in the land of Israel “must accept paying a tax and suffering the humiliation of servitude.”

22 The Jewish population of Israel can be divided into three groups: Orthodox, Traditional, and Secular. Secular Jews make up 41.4% of the Jewish population, followed by the Traditional Jews accounting for 38.5% of the population, with the remaining 20% populated by the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. In Israel, the Reform and Conservative movements are estimated to make up 7.6% of the Jewish population. Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Abstract of Israel 2011” as cited in Wikipedia.

23 Strenger, “Is Bezalel Smotrich the Future of Israel?” *Haaretz* (December 12, 2016). See Appendix I.

national home.

Temple Institute

Rabbi Yisrael Ariel is the head of the Temple Institute, a group that aims to destroy Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque and replace it with a Jewish temple. According to the Israeli group Ir Amim, the Temple Institute is directly funded by the Israeli government, to the tune of hundreds of thousands of shekels annually. The goal is to wrest control of the Haram area from the Muslims in order to build the Third Temple.²⁴

Due to the religious sensitivity of such actions and the fact that Israel has given assurances that it will not change the status quo, the Israeli government finds itself in a conundrum. On the one hand, the main objective of religious Zionism, and especially the extreme religious settlers, many of them Americans, is to take over the Aqsa Haram area. On the other hand, this objective is not tolerated by the Palestinians, the Muslim world and the international community. As a result, the Israeli government has been exerting, through deceitfulness and trickery, a creeping greater control over the Haram.

As an example, in July of 2017 Netanyahu installed metal detectors and smart cameras at the entrance of the Haram. The Muslim worshippers protested the change and vowed not to go in until the changes were reversed. With tens and hundreds of thousands of Muslims conducting their prayers in the streets of Jerusalem, and with regional and international pressures, the Israeli government had to accede to the people's wishes. It was hailed as a victory,

²⁴ More information on the Temple Institute can be found at www.templeinstitute.org.

one of the few, for the Muslims, and a triumph for nonviolent direct action.

Those of us who believe in the power of nonviolence are hoping that the lesson learned will help our people to abandon any violence and use more nonviolent ways as they continue to resist the illegal occupation of their country.

Despite this amazing success, I don't think we have seen the end of the belligerent actions of Jewish religious extremists, including the rightwing Israeli government itself and the Temple Institute, that are determined to take over the Haram.

What Does This Mean?

1. It has become clearer to many people that not only Prime Minister Netanyahu but also the current right-wing government under Naftali Bennett (2021-) have been behind these extreme ideas. They have encouraged and promoted this type of fundamentalism.
2. What has become pervasive in Israel is the apathy of most Jewish secular Israelis who have been silent as if they have surrendered to the religious nationalist extremists.
3. Consequently, with the rise in power of the religious extremists and their insistence on living by the Halakha, Israel is morphing into a religious racist state.
4. With religious extremists in control, the idea of accepting to share the land with the Palestinians becomes very difficult. The government of Israel today (2022) is a right-wing government

with a growing number of government ministers who are living in the illegal settlements.

The old saying is becoming frighteningly true that democracy can live with religion, but religion cannot live with democracy. Whatever modicum of democracy Israel has created is being eroded as fundamentalist religion takes over.

5. The reality on the ground for the Palestinian people is getting worse. Racist behavior by the settlers against the Palestinians is increasing and the rightwing government is failing to address it. Palestinians are being killed, not in the name of a Zionist ideology, but in the name of religion and God.
6. When people's concept of God becomes tribal and exclusive, many people, including those who dissent and are conscientious, suffer.
7. It sounds contradictory that when religion goes berserk it becomes very dangerous to itself as well as to others. When its adherents kill Palestinians, they believe they are doing service to God (John 16:2).

Many religious Jews are aware of the reality of the situation in Israel-Palestine. If they are not aware, let them check the veracity of my words. If my assessment is true, I hope that they will raise the alarm. There are atrocities being committed in the name of Judaism and they need to stop. Our Jewish friends are the best qualified to bring about change. The government of Israel is not listening; it is not paying attention to international law, to human rights, and to the pleas of many Jewish people both inside and outside the country. Smotrich and his ilk could become the future of Israel.

For those of us who are not Jewish but care about justice, peace, and liberation for all people, and in this case, for the Palestinian people, we must raise our voices and do whatever we can to stop the madness and insanity of a terrible situation. We need to take action for the sake of our common humanity and for the sake of God who calls us to do justice, to love mercy and to walk in humility and in love of God and neighbor.

Appendix I

Smotrich - the Future of Israel?

Carlo Strenger, December 13, 2016

Last weekend (December 2016) Ravit Hecht published an excellent portrait of Bezael Smotrich, the rising star of the national-religious Habayit Hayehudi. Most secular Israelis primarily know three things about him: He said that he understands why his wife does not want to give birth alongside an Arab woman; that Reform Judaism is a “fake religion”, and that he had declared himself a “proud homophobe”. In brief, he is seen as a bizarre, racist, homophobic extremist, who is of no interest except for his weirdness.

Israel's “right to annex all of the West Bank”

Hecht, who got to know Smotrich well, paints a very different picture: Smotrich is not only a very crafty politician who has made a name for himself within a very short time in the Knesset, but an intellectually sharp mind with remarkable secular knowledge. He has an MA in international law, of which he makes skillful use in his argument for Israel's right to annex all of the West Bank.

Most of all, Smotrich has a highly coherent, well-defined world view based on a single starting point: All of the greater Land of Israel belongs to the Jews by virtue of God's decree. No human-made law can compete with God's will.

Three Choices for the Palestinians

Once this is fully accepted, he argues, it is clear that Israel must annex all of the West Bank, abort any Palestinian hope for a national home and leave them three choices: To leave, to fight against Israel and be destroyed mercilessly, or to accept living under Israeli rule. It seems pretty clear to me on the basis of other interviews he has given that he would give them the status of “Ger Toshav”, i.e., an inhabitant without political and voting rights.

Smotrich comes across as suave, charming, with a good sense of humor, and has proven time and again that he knows how to handle secular media well. But while he does not say so explicitly, he is a full-blown messianic believer. He has stated in other interviews that the Third Temple may come into being at any time; and his belief that the world will accept Jewish rule over the greater Land of Israel is ultimately theologically based on the many prophecies that the gentiles will recognize God’s kingdom on Earth and the Jewish people as the chosen people, and that Truth and Wisdom emanate from Zion.

Success of Religious Nationalism

For most secular Israelis, this makes him an extremist nutcase, and yet religious nationalism is taking over Israel’s education system and gaining an ever-stronger foothold in the army. This gradual takeover of central Israeli institutions by religious nationalism in part hinges on the craftiness of its politicians who use every bit of their leverage to transform the country in the vein of their ideology.

But there is a deeper reason for religious nationalism’s success: An ever-growing part of Israelis drift towards this religious form of

ultra-nationalism that portrays Jews as the superior, chosen people with God-given rights that trump simple, man-made notions like human rights and gender equality.

A Paradigm in Social Psychology

Psychology has long ago given a convincing explanation for phenomena like Israelis' willingness to embrace this world view. Cognitive dissonance theory, one of the most successful paradigms in social psychology, has shown for half a century that, in the long run, human beings cannot live feeling that what they do is bad. If they cannot stop doing it, they change their beliefs to the point where they feel justified in acting as they do.

Israel has been an occupying power for almost fifty years, and two Israeli generations have grown up knowing nothing else. Many Israelis simply try to repress this inconvenient fact, and no longer want to be reminded of it. But a growing number of Israelis avoid feeling guilty by gradually adopting the national-religious ideology that justifies Israel's actions.

A Version of White Supremacism

This is why disregarding the likes of Bezael Smotrich is dangerously wrong. Smotrich is an expression of the Israeli unconscious. His belief that Jews are the chosen people with more rights than others, is a religious version of the white supremacism that has been raising its ugly head through Trump's election. And while I do not know how to fight the national-religious mentality, liberal-secular Israelis should take it very seriously. It may well be Israel's future.

Carlo Strenger is a Haaretz contributor.

Appendix II

Israel's Minister of Truth

Gideon Levy, September 1, 2017

Thank you, Ayelet Shaked,²⁵ for telling the truth. Thank you for speaking honestly. The justice minister has proved once again that Israel's extreme right is better than the deceivers of the center-left: It speaks honestly.

If in 1975, Chaim Herzog dramatically tore up a copy of UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, equating Zionism with racism, the justice minister has now admitted the truthfulness of the resolution (which was later revoked). Shaked said, loud and clear: Zionism contradicts human rights, and thus is indeed an ultranationalist, colonialist and perhaps even racist movement, as proponents of justice worldwide maintain.

Shaked prefers Zionism to human rights, the ultimate universal justice. She believes that we have a different kind of justice, superior to universal justice. Zionism above all. It's been said before, in other languages and other nationalist movements.

Had Shaked not pitted these two principles against each other, we would have continued to believe what has been drilled into us since childhood: Zionism is a just, morally unflawed movement. It sanctifies equality and justice: Just look at our Declaration of

²⁵ Ayelet Shaked served as Israel's Minister of Justice from 2015 to 2019 and is currently serving as Minister of Interior.

Independence. We memorized “the only democracy in the Middle East,” “a land without a people for a people without a land,” “everyone is equal in the Jewish state”; we learned about the Arab Supreme Court justice and the Druze cabinet minister. What more could we ask? It’s so just, so equal, you could cry.

If this were all true, Shaked would have no reason to come to the defense of Zionism in the face of human rights. For Shaked and the right, the debate on human and civil rights is anti-Zionist, even anti-Semitic. It seeks to undermine and destroy the Jewish state.

Thus, Shaked believes, as do so many around the world, that Israel is built on foundations of injustice and therefore must be defended from the hostile talk of justice. How else can the repulsion to discussing rights be explained? Individual rights are important, she said, but not when they are disconnected from “the Zionist challenges.” Right again: The Zionist challenges indeed stand in contradiction to human rights.

What are today’s Zionist challenges? To “Judaize” the Negev and Galilee, remove the “infiltrators,” cultivate Israel’s Jewish character and preserve its Jewish majority. The occupation, the settlements, the cult of security, the army — which is primarily an occupation army — that is Zionism circa 2017. All its components are contrary to justice. After we were told that Zionism and justice were identical twins, that no national movement is more just than Zionism, Shaked came to say: just the opposite. Zionism is not just, it contradicts justice, but we shall cleave to it and prefer it to justice, because it’s our identity, our history and our national mission. No activist for the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement would say it more sharply. But no nation has the right to spurn universal principles and invent its principles that call day

night, the occupation just and discrimination equality.

Zionism is Israel's fundamentalist religion, and as in any religion, its denial is prohibited. In Israel, "non-Zionist" or "anti-Zionist" aren't insults, they are social expulsion orders. There's nothing like it in any free society. But now that Shaked has exposed Zionism, put her hand to the flame and admitted the truth, we can finally think about Zionism more freely. We can admit that the Jews' right to a state contradicted the Palestinians' right to their land, and that righteous Zionism gave birth to a terrible national wrong that has never been righted; that there are ways to resolve and atone for this contradiction, but the Zionist Israelis won't agree to them.

Now, then, is the time for a new division, braver and more honest, between those Israelis who agree with Shaked's statement and those who disagree. Between supporters of Zionism and supporters of justice. Between Zionists and the just. Shaked did not provide for a third option.

Gideon Levy is a Haaretz columnist and a member of the newspaper's editorial board. He was the recipient of the Euro-Med Journalist Prize for 2008; the Leipzig Freedom Prize in 2001; the Israeli Journalists' Union Prize in 1997; and The Association of Human Rights in Israel Award for 1996.

Appendix III

Why Religious Zionism Is Growing Darker

Dr. Tomer Persico, May 16, 2017

(Updated: Apr. 24, 2018)

At a gathering of religious Zionist public figures two weeks ago, Deputy Knesset Speaker Betzalel Smotrich talked about his diplomatic plan, which he dubbed “The subjugation plan.” The purpose of the plan, he said, was “to erase all Palestinian national hope.”

Under the plan, the Palestinians will be given three choices – to leave the country; to live in Israel with the status of “resident alien,” because, as Smotrich made sure to note, “according to Jewish law there must always be some inferiority,” or to resist, “and then the Israel Defense Forces will know what to do.” When the deputy Knesset speaker was asked if he intended to wipe out whole families, including women and children, Smotrich replied, “In war, as in war.”

Smotrich presented the Book of Joshua as the source for his remarks. According to the Midrash, Joshua sent the residents of the land of Canaan three letters in which he set out the three aforementioned conditions. Maimonides explains that if the non-Jews do not flee, they must have limitations imposed on them “so they should be despised and lowly, and not raise their heads in Israel.” If they resist, he says, “not a soul must be left among them” – in other words, kill them all.

How many of those who sat and listened to these horrible things

– learned men and women, Torah scholars and community leaders – agreed with him? It’s impossible to know. There were protests raised during the question period, in which some of those in attendance expressed shock. But not everyone was shocked.

I thought back to the op-ed by Yossi Klein last month that raised such a storm. Does “religious Zionism” want to “seize control of the state and cleanse it of Arabs,” as he wrote? No, definitely not. Are there people in that community who indeed want to do this? Yes, absolutely. The question is how numerous they are, or, in other words, where to place Smotrich. Is he on the margins, part of an extremist, fundamentalist and zealous minority, who isn’t taken too seriously – or in the center, a future leader of a large public?

One of the characteristics of fundamentalist religiosity is the reduction of religious tradition into a rigid and simplistic framework of principles. It’s generally joined by a monolithic perception of history, as if all eras are identical and what was true 2,000 years ago is still valid today, and a strong desire to renew our days as of old, i.e., to bring the past into the present. All these together create a one-dimensional surrender to the authority of Scripture. This is generally done in a very unconventional manner, since fundamentalist obedience hews closely to the literal meaning of the text, while non-fundamental religiosity recognizes that religious truth is complex (“There are 70 faces to the Torah”), provides interpretations of Scripture, and integrates other considerations into its approach to faith.

Religious Zionism is not fundamentalist. Most of the community leads a traditional religious life of interpretation and flexibility. Most live in the center of the country, in Jerusalem and Petah Tikva, Kfar Sava and Ra’anana. We’re talking about a middle-class,

solid, bourgeois, satisfied community. Judaism for them is a deep identity and a way of life, but they don't dream at night about rebuilding the Temple and they are pleased to live in a democracy.

Hard for Democracy to Win Out over Nationalism

But Smotrich understood something when he spoke with this community's representatives. Because he was speaking to a totally observant audience, he allowed himself to expose the religious-mythic underpinnings of his ideas. He hoped that speaking about Jewish law and the Book of Joshua would lead to an automatic identification with his remarks that would be reinforced by the dormant foundations of a deeply rooted tradition. He hoped that his religious language would make his ideas much harder to oppose. Unfortunately, that hope is not unfounded.

Democracy, like liberalism, is an ethos. Religious tradition, like nationalism, is the foundation of identity and narrative perception. In a contest between them, it's very difficult for the former to triumph. If during the 20th century Western nationalism substantively included democracy and liberalism (and thus also moderated religion), in recent decades there's been a gap emerging between them. As we can see from the refugee crisis in Europe and the Brexit vote, when the masses feel that liberalism is undermining the foundations of nationalism, the response is to boost nationalism at the expense of liberalism. Narrative and identity trump ethos.

Certain people in the religious-Zionist camp, Smotrich among them, turn to Jewish identity and use a mythic narrative to enlist support for anti-liberal ideas. In a situation in which liberalism is perceived as opposing identity, or in a situation in which there is no answer defending liberalism that's based on identity, they will

succeed in drawing many after them, first and foremost those who are deeply connected to tradition. Only a position that emerges from one's identity toward liberalism, which reunites nationalism and liberalism (and even religion and democracy), can prevent many religious Zionists and others from being drawn to the insane ideas of Smotrich and his ilk.

The fact that Smotrich is a dangerous fundamentalist who seeks to give the Palestinians a choice between transfer, apartheid or genocide is horrifying. It's hard to complain to the Palestinian Authority about their encouragement of terror when the deputy Knesset speaker of the State of Israel supports this type of "subjugation plan." He should be removed from his post and thrown out of the Knesset.

But even if this were to happen, the important question is what kind of response we, the religious and secular Zionists, proffer to his ideas. Until there is such an answer, he will continue to move from the margins to the center.

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Appendix IV

The World Should Back a New Approach to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Financial Times, June 30, 2021

Ban Ki-moon²⁶

(Ban Ki-moon calls for a new approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and recognises the importance of the international community in ending the enduring violence and oppression in the region.)

It is time to acknowledge that the longstanding approach taken to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the international community has failed and a new one is required.

The recent eruption of violence, not only in Gaza and Jerusalem but also between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel, showed why this enduring conflict cannot be ignored and illustrated the need for fresh thinking.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the 1993 Oslo Accords no longer offer a viable pathway towards self-determination for the Palestinians, and have failed to deliver peace and security in Israel or Palestine. Instead, Israel has pursued a policy of incremental de facto annexation in the territories it has occupied since 1967,

²⁶ Ban Ki-Moon is the Deputy Chair of The Elders and former Secretary-General of the United Nations.

to the point where the prospect of a two-state solution has all but vanished.

The starting point of a new approach must be to recognise the fundamental asymmetry between the parties. This is not a conflict between equals that can be resolved through bilateral negotiations, confidence-building measures or mutual sequencing of steps — the traditional conflict-resolution tools.

The reality is very different: a powerful state is controlling another people through an open-ended occupation, settling its own people on the land in violation of international law and enforcing a legal regime of institutionalised discrimination. Calls for a return to unconditional bilateral talks every time there is a fresh flare-up in fighting will only serve to perpetuate the status quo if these root causes are not addressed.

What has become increasingly clear in recent years is Israel's intent to maintain its structural domination and oppression of the Palestinian people through indefinite occupation. This gives the dual legal regimes imposed in Palestinian territories by Israel — together with the inhumane and abusive acts that are carried out against Palestinians — new significance, resulting in a situation that arguably constitutes apartheid. It is now time for the international community to recognise and confront the consequences of Israel's policies and actions in this regard.

The lack of any international legal accountability has enabled Israel to ignore successive UN resolutions, most recently UNSCR 2334 of December 2016 which says that settlement building violates international law. That is why the International Criminal Court's rulings that it has jurisdiction over the Palestinian territories and

plans to investigate war crimes committed by all sides are so important and give grounds for modest hope.

Political cover provided by successive US governments to Israel is partly to blame for this lack of accountability. What is encouraging though is the pushback from new coalitions in the US.

President Joe Biden's administration should seize this moment and work together with the EU, UK and others on a new approach that is consistent with their public commitments to uphold human rights in their foreign policies. Statements in support of equal rights, security and prosperity for both Israelis and Palestinians ring hollow in the face of policies and actions that actively undermine these principles.

Changes in the Israeli and Palestinian domestic political scenes also suggest that the status quo of recent years is coming under challenge from different directions. The new Israeli government is based on an unusually broad coalition, but is currently led by a prime minister, Naftali Bennett, who publicly rejects Palestinian rights and has long called for annexation of the 60 per cent of the West Bank designated under the Oslo Accords as Area C. At the same time, progressive figures within the coalition government and Israeli civil society believe the public mood is changing.

Within Palestinian politics, fresh winds may also be blowing. President Mahmoud Abbas' decision to cancel planned elections, 15 years after his people last went to the polls, has sparked a revival of Palestinians' demands for their democratic rights which deserve to be respected by their own leaders. The international community has a crucial role to play in lending its support to ensure a transparent, credible and democratic process that reflects the true will

of the Palestinian people.

An end to the occupation must remain the primary goal, with the immediate priority being the pursuit of equal rights for all living in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Israelis, Palestinians and their friends abroad with the ability to alter the trajectory in a decisive way should seize this moment of change.

Appendix V

How Israeli Jews' Fear of Christianity Turned into Hatred

Haaretz, February 6, 2021

David M. Neuhaus

(The life of Jesus and the religion he spawned are taught in Israeli schools in a way that's inconsistent with their influence on European culture and Western civilization, scholars lament in a new book.)

During the reception ceremony for the new Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, this past December, we heard the news: a religious Jew had tried to set fire to the church at Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Once again, a religious-Zionist Israeli Jew had acted with violence against Christians in the Holy Land. This time, guards at the church caught the offender while he was in the act. Those attending the ceremony could guess the future course of events: He would be diagnosed as mentally disturbed. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases of violence against Christians in Israel, the offenders are absolved of responsibility by way of a psychiatric diagnosis.

Hasn't the time come to examine the way enmity toward Christians is inculcated and nurtured among the Jewish population in Israel? "Jesus Was a Jew," by Orit Ramon, Inés Gabel and Varda Wasserman, analyzes the way that Christians and Christianity are depicted

in the Israeli education system, in both the regular and the religious streams. The authors, faculty members of the Open University of Israel, offer a fine description of the tragic historical situation of the Jews in Christian Europe over the past centuries, and of the State of Israel's sensitive geopolitical situation. But alongside this, they describe how Christians living in the Jewish state as a small, marginal community experience relentlessly the consequences of a majority that has received an education that emphasizes time and again negative stereotypes of Christianity.

Through the authors' examination of official curricula and textbooks, and by surveying attitudes of teachers and other educators, they present the different ways in which Christianity is mediated to students. The first illuminating fact arising from their study is the meager occupation with Christianity, in a manner wholly inconsistent with its influence on the development of European culture and Western civilization. The authors see Christianity as a kind of "present absentee," because of the covert use that is made of it for its role in "the creation of Jewish identity." The bulk of the study focuses on how this is done, notably in history classes, which are of course taught from a Jewish perspective, and which aspire to reinforce both pupils' national-Jewish and religious identities.

The basic assumption in all state schools' curricula is that Christianity is "a powerful political, social and religious force that threatened – both physically and culturally – Jewish existence." That is indeed part of the story, but how valid is it in contemporary Israel, where the Jews are the majority and the sovereign, who rule over a small Christian community that lacks any real power? The fear of Christianity became genuine repulsion in contemporary Israel, the authors write, because "the Holocaust was perceived – and still is – as the inevitable peak in the bitter relationship between Jews

and Christians.”

As for me, in my own reading of secular state-education textbooks published in the 1990s, I noticed a certain change for the better. The books were factual, objective and more respectful of Christianity. An example is the sixth-grade textbook “Greece, Rome and Jerusalem.” The 239-page book, which has spectacular illustrations, contains a full chapter, titled “A New Religion in the Land of Israel: Christianity,” with citations from the New Testament and from Church documents. Special emphasis is placed on the fact that Jesus’ first disciples were religiously observant Jews. It’s true that here too it is blatantly declared that “according to the Christian faith, the Jewish people is guilty of crucifying the messiah Jesus” – but the same paragraph notes the nullification of the guilty claim by decision of “the Christian Church.”

This refers of course to the Catholic Church, but as the authors of “Jesus Was a Jew” point out, the way Christianity is presented in Israeli schools is focused disproportionately on the Catholic Church. They maintain that this does not reflect sheer ignorance concerning the various Christian denominations, but is rather an implicit defense of the monopoly held by Orthodox Judaism in Israel itself. That is: “The nearly exclusive addressing of Catholicism in the Israeli classroom also enables the defining of Orthodox Judaism as the sole, legitimate basis for Israeli Jewish identity.”

But the textbook mentioned above also leaves teachers a lot of latitude to present Christianity in a negative light, if only by their use of the term “Yeshu,” as the man from Nazareth is called in rabbinic tradition, instead of Yeshua (or even Yehoshua) – the correct Hebrew translation of the Greek name used in the New Testament, the name the man of Nazareth shared with Moses’s

successor Joshua. The religious public in Israel is in many cases aware of the traditional interpretation of the term “Yeshu”: an acronym in Hebrew for “may his name and memory be blotted out.”

Ramon, Gabel and Wasserman note that the failure of the 1990s attempts at reform in this realm are testimony to the victory of “more closed and ethnocentric tendencies in shaping the identity of Israeli state school graduates.” In state-religious schools, which add religion-driven polemics to the typical Israeli historical revulsion vis-a-vis Christianity, the hostility toward that religion is perhaps even greater. In another sixth-grade history textbook, one intended for the religious schools (“From Generation to Generation,” Vol. 1), focusing on the Roman era and up to that empire’s destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus is mentioned only in passing. The miracles performed by Jesus, who is again referred to as “Yeshu,” are attributed to his expertise in medicinal herbs.

In any event, according to that textbook, only the simple folk believed in him, he preached against the tradition of the sages and was convicted for being an inciter and sorcerer. The description borrows heavily from rabbinic polemics. Not only is Christianity presented as a polytheistic faith, but one ostensibly lacking all logic. In that context, this past year, Karma Ben-Johanan, a historian of religion, published “Reconciliation and Its Discontents: Unresolved Tensions in Jewish-Christian Relations” (Tel Aviv University; in Hebrew) – a comprehensive study of the disturbing attitudes of Orthodox Judaism in Israel toward Christianity .

“Jesus Was a Jew” illuminates the need to alter the discourse and message that the Israeli education system is imparting to future generations. The material being taught is not preparing the pupil to become acquainted with a religious tradition that is venerated by

a considerable part of the world's population and also constitutes an important community in Israeli society. Although a negative attitude toward Christianity may be understandable in light of Jewish history, the fact is that in the State of Israel where Jews are a majority and are sovereign, it is the state's responsibility to treat all its citizens, including those who are Christian, with equality and with dignity.

At a time when many Christians are working sincerely and diligently to uproot every vestige of the historic doctrine of contempt vis-a-vis the Jews or Judaism, the time is ripe for those responsible for education in Israel to be on their guard against disdain and enmity on the part of Jews toward the Christians and Christianity. The important book under review here attests to the challenge facing us.

Father David Neuhaus is the superior of Holy Land Jesuits and director of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem.

Appendix VI

Israeli Extremists Threaten Christian Presence in Jerusalem, Church Leader Says

Haaretz, January 9, 2022

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem says he believes radical Israeli groups aim to drive the Christian community from the old city, which has sites sacred to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem has accused radical Israeli groups of threatening the presence of Christians in the holy city, in remarks that Israeli officials rejected as baseless.

In a column in the Times of London on Saturday, His Beatitude, Theophilos III, said he believed the aim was to drive the Christian community from Jerusalem's Old City, which has sites sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Israel captured East Jerusalem, including the Old City, along with the West Bank and Gaza Strip in a 1967 war. It annexed East Jerusalem after the war in a move that has not won international recognition.

“Our presence in Jerusalem is under threat,” the patriarch wrote in the article, published a day after the Greek Orthodox celebration of Christmas.

“Our churches are threatened by Israeli radical fringe groups. At the hands of these Zionist extremists the Christian community in

Jerusalem is suffering greatly, he said.

“Our brothers and sisters are the victims of hate crimes. Our churches are regularly desecrated and vandalized. Our clergy are subject to frequent intimidation.”

By singling out extremists as Israeli, Theophilos’s criticism was more personal and trenchant than that of a collective statement issued by the heads of other churches in Jerusalem before Christmas.

Their statement spoke of “frequent and sustained attacks by fringe radical groups” but stopped short of identifying them as Israeli.

A U.S. State Department report published last year on religious freedom around the world said Christian clergy and pilgrims continued to report instances of ultraOrthodox Jews in Jerusalem harassing or spitting on them.

Church groups have for some time reported attacks of vandalism at religious sites in the city. Theophilos did not accuse any radical groups by name or cite specific incidents. He did not provide evidence that they were Israeli, or that their goal was to drive Christians from the city.

On Sunday, an Israeli official said the reality on the ground for Christians was completely different from that described by the patriarch, citing a Foreign Ministry statement on Dec 22 that rebutted the earlier church leaders’ claims.

“Since the day it was established, the State of Israel has been committed to freedom of religion and worship for all religions, as well as to ensuring the freedom of access to holy sites,” the ministry

statement said.

“The statement by Church leaders in Jerusalem is particularly infuriating given their silence on the plight of many Christian communities in the Middle East suffering from discrimination and persecution.”

In his column, Theophilos said the radicals that he criticized “are not representative of the state of Israel or the Jewish people,” and called on Jerusalem to remain a diverse “mosaic community” of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

