

Religion and Politics in Israel/
Palestine and the Question of
Toleration/Intolerance

Dedicated to Betsy Barlow

Liberation Theology as a Test for
Authentic Religion

Dedicated to Gustavo Guitiérrez

*Two Papers by
Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek*

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**Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology
Center**

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Note to the Reader

The issue of religious toleration/intolerance in Israel/Palestine is a ubiquitous problem that demands constant education and diligence by people of faith. In this paper, I try to help the reader to understand the religious background of this matter and the way it has been lived out and practiced, positively or negatively, among the adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths that live together in Israel and occupied Palestine. It is important to continue to wrestle with this relevant subject that has not only religious and theological implications but equally political and social ones. I would like to dedicate this paper to Betsy Barlow who was the first to start Friends of Sabeel in the U.S. and was its coordinator for 5 years. Betsy suggested this topic, "Religious Toleration/Intolerance in Israel/Palestine: Reality and Future Prospects," and invited me to address it in a lecture I gave at the International Institute at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor on March 23, 1998. The topic is still as relevant today as it was then. I hope the reader will find it stimulating and thought-provoking and worthy of study and discussion.¹

1 This paper has been updated as of July 2020.

Introduction and Limitation

I am grateful to the International Institute of the University of Michigan for this opportunity to present a paper on the topic of toleration/intolerance in religion. I have found the assignment very stimulating and challenging. In fact, it has opened for me a number of vistas which I would like to pursue. I would, therefore, consider this paper as an introduction to the whole subject of toleration for which much more research is needed.

It is important to set forth from the start the focus of this paper and its limitation. As many of you know, those of us who live in Israel/Palestine, live in the context of five religions: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Druze, and Bahai. The first three constitute the major religions of our area and are my immediate context in life. I am, therefore, writing from my perspective as a Palestinian Christian who holds Israeli citizenship and who has lived most of his life in the area.

This paper has a number of important limitations in its focus. It is limited to the issues of toleration and intolerance within the three religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in the state of Israel and in Palestine, that is the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and not outside of it. At times, my references include the Middle East region but hardly do they go beyond it. To a large extent, I am not dealing with the question of toleration and intolerance in the state of Israel or the Arab countries, but with the religions within them and the influence those religions exert on those states and societies. I am also focusing on the predominant denomination of that religion which represents the majority of the religious people in the country. In every religion, there are other

voices or other denominations, but they might not represent the traditional or most influential religious segment in society.

Historical and Religious Background Regarding the Issue of Toleration/Intolerance in the Middle East

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as the world experienced them chronologically, have been living in proximity in the Middle East for the last 1400 years. Each of them emerged from the same general Semitic context. Each drew upon the religious milieu around it and was affected by its predecessor. There is some common ground among the three religions as well as some basic differences. In other words, one can find some similarities and continuity in religious thought as well as some basic dissimilarity and discontinuity. Obviously, this depends on the measure of one's openness to a comparative study of these three religions.

When we focus on geographic Palestine—today Israel and Palestine — as well as the Middle East, it is clear that religion has been intertwined with politics. In the history of the last 2000 years, the adherents of every one of the three religions assumed, at one time or another, political control over the land. Whenever that happened they showed intolerance against the adherents of the other religion/religions. Western Christians twice assumed political control. The first under the Byzantines and the second during the Crusades—and if we want to be more specific under the British Mandate for 30 years in the 20th century. In both of these cases, the local Christians of the land had no power. On the contrary, the indigenous Christians suffered at the hands of fellow Christians. It was the western Christians who had political power. Be that as it may, Christian rule could not be described as tolerance. In fact, not only did Jews suffer because they were accused of killing Jesus, many indigenous Christians suffered because they did not adhere

to the “orthodox” faith. Intolerance within the different Christian denominations became so prevalent that many Christians preferred to escape Byzantine controlled areas and live under the Persians. During the time of the Crusades, indigenous Christians suffered as did Jews and Muslims. The local Greek Orthodox Patriarch was ousted and replaced by a Latin one. Jews were forced to live outside the city of Jerusalem. The Muslims were the obvious enemies and they were subjected to a good deal of suffering.

The Muslims had their turn of political power beginning with the 7th century. Teachers of Arab history usually emphasize that Arab Muslims, in contrast with later non-Arab Muslims, were generally more tolerant in their rule and in their treatment of non-Muslims. Christians and Jews enjoyed some prominent positions in the courts of a number of Arab Muslim khalifs. In fact, there were, at times, religious debates held before the khalif himself in the royal court. Issues like the Trinity were heavily and freely debated by Christian and Muslim scholars of the day.

As an example of Islamic tolerance, however, one can cite what Muslims did for Jews in two different periods of history. Jews were prevented from living in Jerusalem by the Byzantines after the fourth century and later by the Crusaders in the eleventh century. In both cases, Jews were allowed to return to the city when the Muslims regained control over it. This prompted the Israeli historian Zev Vilnay to write,

Whenever Jerusalem came under the rule of Christians, Jews were not allowed to stay or live in it. Those Jews who happened to come to the city during their (the Christian’s) rule were either killed or expelled. On the other hand, whenever the Muslims occupied the city they used to call the Jews in, allow them to live inside the city... and they

lived in peace.²

Since 1948, the state of Israel has existed on the land of Palestine as a Jewish state. Although the early Zionists were not at all religious, they chose to establish it as a Jewish state which carries within it both the religious as well as the national identity for Jews. Obviously, they wanted to establish a state primarily for the Jewish people. Although Israel has been hailed in the West as the only democracy in the Middle East, non-Jews have always been discriminated against. Today there are approximately 2 million Palestinians who are Israeli citizens who do not enjoy the same equal treatment.

What is important to remember here is that in the religious history of our area, intolerance seems to have been the norm. Many people only needed an excuse in order to exercise their intolerance, as if this was the basic instinct that governed the way humans related to people outside their religious group. Intolerance took different shapes and forms. It was prompted by ethnic, gender, socio-economic, religious, or a dozen other reasons that justified the intolerance. Apparently, intolerance is something which we have within us. Theologically speaking, it is part of a sinful nature that we have. It can vary from the benign to the dangerously malignant. It can show itself in simple and seemingly innocuous behavior towards others, yet unless it is addressed through education, reform, religious or ethical training, it can lead to rejection and even persecution of the other.

What is the religious background to the intolerance which I have observed in the three religions as I have experienced them in Israel/Palestine?

2 K.J. Asali, "Jerusalem in History: Notes on the Origins of the City and its Tradition of Tolerance" in Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol 16, No. 4, Fall 1994, p. 41.

Yahwism: Ancient Israelite Religion

In the case of ancient Israelite religion, and Islam, political power has been important from the very beginning. According to the biblical account, the ancient Israelites were a group of people coming out of bondage in Egypt who needed organization and guidance, hence the giving of the Torah. The law with all of its rules, commandments, and regulations governed their everyday life. It articulated their basic belief in Yahweh, their God, and regulated their relationship with each other. The commandment not to have other gods implied a basic rejection of any person or community that did not share their same belief in the one God. Any intolerance against other nations stemmed from this basic faith. If the Israelites did not have military power, they were expected to remain faithful to their basic beliefs and guard against the pollution of their own religion. If they possessed military power, they were encouraged to actively destroy those nations who stood in their way of fulfilling God's orders of conquering the land and eliminating the idolatrous nations. The same basic intolerance was equally harshly shown against any fellow Israelite who did not comply with the required beliefs. For example, the Sabbath regulations were strictly enforced. At one time when an Israelite was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath, he was stoned to death (Numbers 15:32). It was the tenets of the religion that governed life and became the measure for its ability to exercise toleration or intolerance.

Islam

In the case of Islam, Muhammad received the Qur'an against a milieu of paganism and a number of early Christian sects that differed theologically. He started to convey his ideas of God to the

people around him, many of whom enjoyed a very lucrative business in Mecca. Their first reaction was a rejection of his teachings. The opposition became so intense, he had to flee from Mecca to Medina. As he gained more followers, and in spite of some initial military setbacks, he was successful in mustering enough support and power to return and conquer Mecca. From then on, the successive military campaigns, whether during his lifetime or after his death, were aimed at spreading the faith. People had a choice. They could either acknowledge the oneness and supremacy of Allah and become Muslim or enter into a military battle against the Muslim armies. If they belonged to the Christian or Jewish religions they had to accept the payment of the *jizya*, the special tax. Any intolerance of others was the result of the Muslim's understanding and implementing the will of Allah. For Muslims, Islam was a call to bring people back to the final and complete belief in the one God.

One of the basic contrasts between the early Muslim and Israelite communities had to do with how the new teachings were delivered to the people. In the case of the Israelites, they were, so to say, a captive audience in Sinai. They were together in the desert and Moses gave them the law saying in essence, this is what your God gives you. So it was delivered to them and it initiated their eventual formation into a nation, though they belonged to different tribes. The conflict was from the start internal and external. The people were expected to obey the commandments of Yahweh within the community itself and to struggle against the idolatrous nations around them.

With Islam, the Arab tribes, mostly polytheistic, were spread out in Arabia. Some tribes were already Christian. The battles of Muhammad were to win over the Arab tribes to the new religion as the final message and revelation of God. He had no captive

audience. He had to enforce the new faith in God on the Arabs and from the very beginning, the Muslims had to relate to peoples of other beliefs, namely, Jews and Christians. The Muslim beliefs, i.e., what God has decreed, became the basis on which people were governed. Muhammad was conscious that God was calling him for the establishment of a new religion which would be the final and complete revelation from God.³

Christianity

The case with Christianity is quite different from that of Judaism and Islam and, I believe, more complicated. Jesus was born in Palestine where he lived all his life, teaching, preaching, and healing as he proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom. In Jerusalem, he was accused of disturbing the religious status quo and was condemned to death through crucifixion by the religious and political powers of the day. His disciples and followers believed that he was the long-awaited messiah. God vindicated Jesus by raising Him from the dead. His disciples witnessed his resurrection and they started to proclaim Jesus Christ as savior and lord.

Although the nascent faith started within the Jewish community in Palestine, it soon spread and was being addressed to all people regardless of their ethnic or racial background. The new faith had no political clout and within a relatively few years became persecuted by the Roman Empire. For the first 300 years, the Christians survived as a persecuted minority and the object of intolerance. Things began to change with the conversion of Emperor Constantine. The Christian religion became the more favored of religions. This new status opened the way for many people to join the new

3 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* Mentor, 1964, pp.75-77.

religion, whether genuinely or conveniently. The first intolerance of the Christian leadership of the church was shown internally rather than externally. It was directed at what was considered as a heresy within the church. The history of Christianity from then on has been marred and plagued with great intolerance internally against Christian heretics, and externally against the Jews.

The new Christian faith centered around the person of Jesus Christ and the relationship between Christ and God. The questions of heresy were the crucial issues that occupied most of the time of the leadership of the church. They could not agree among themselves what constituted orthodox faith and had to resort to church councils in order to establish the right doctrines. The uniqueness of Christ and his divinity emerged as the measuring rod for orthodoxy.

As to intolerance against Jews, the Book of Acts records an initial persecution and intolerance by Jews against the early followers of Jesus (Acts 5:17-41; 7:54-60; 9:1-25). This, however, was reversed by Christian persecution and intolerance against Jews after Constantine. Early Christians understood the destruction of the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as evidence of God's judgment upon Jews because of their rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus.

Reasons for Basic Intolerance in Religion in the Middle East

From my experience and observation, there are two basic reasons for religious intolerance in the Middle East, namely, the question of God and the question of political power.

The Question of God and an Infallible Revelation

Before I analyze the problem of religious toleration/intolerance in the Middle East, I would like to draw your attention to the area in which the problem lies. Scholars of religion have over the years offered various theories of religion. Ninian Smart suggested a six-dimensional structure of religion which he divided into two groups. The first group he named the para-historical and it is composed of the doctrinal, mythological, and the ethical dimensions. The second group is the historical dimension and is composed of the ritual, experiential, and social dimensions.⁴ Like any other scheme, it is never totally satisfactory and other scholars either modified it or suggested their own schemes.

In his book, *Understanding Religion*,⁵ Eric Sharpe reduced the six dimensions into four functional modes of religion, namely, the existential, intellectual, institutional, and ethical. In all suggested schemes, there is a recognition that in most religions, and certainly in the three main religions in the Middle East, there is the dimension of the transcendent, the divine, and the supernatural which believers have to accept as a given. These are the axioms of

⁴ Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*, Humanities, 1969.

⁵ Eric Sharpe, *Understanding Religion*, Palgrave, 1983.

that religion and they must be accepted as divinely inspired and revealed. These axioms have ethical and social implications which the adherents are supposed to practice.

As I try to understand the whole question of the interplay between religion and politics as regarding the issue of toleration and intolerance in the three religions in the Middle East, I believe that the area in which the problem lies is in the para-historical dimension. In other words, intolerance lies in the area of the axioms, of “truths” which every religion has accepted as literally God-given. It is in the realm of the sacred, the holy, and the revealed knowledge of God that the basic problem lies. One would theoretically think that the point of agreement among, what we have learned to call, the three monotheistic religions would be in their understanding of God. Instead, it is really this point which constitutes our greatest and biggest obstacle. It affects all other dimensions of religion and governs the relational and ethical behavior with others. And when religious political parties have power, political policy is affected and the results are harmful.

In other words, the basic problem has to do with three essential things: First, the basic concept of God which that religion holds. Secondly, the body of “truths” or “beliefs” which that religion accepts as handed down to it by God. Thirdly, how that religion understands the way God expects its adherents to relate to the other. The question or the “problem” is essentially theological in nature before it is ethical. I am, therefore, afraid that unless that religion finds a solution to the theological, it will continue to be very difficult to deal with the relational. Religiously speaking, it is our view of God that determines the parameters of our toleration or intolerance of others. It can either close us off and make us intolerant and exclusive, or it can open us up, making us more

tolerant and inclusive. I strongly believe that the first and major reason for religious toleration or intolerance in the Middle East has to do with the way every one of these three religions under consideration understands God.

Political Power

The second reason for religious intolerance has to do with the measure of political power which that religion enjoys. In the Middle East, religion and politics have been most of the time closely linked. The closer the linkage between the two, the more harm has been directed against the less favored religions and the greater has been the intolerance. Since the essence of intolerance against the outsider lies in a particular religious view of God, it is possible to live in some measure of peace with that religion so long as it does not enjoy political power. Political power allows it to practice its intolerance publicly and broadly. Each of the three religions in the Middle East holds negative ideas and perceptions about the other and teaches these, one way or another, to its own community. I hope that the time will come when this practice will cease. Theoretically, however, this can be done without publicly or openly harming the adherents of the other religions so long as they do not possess political power.

For example, Judaism can continue to claim that it has a special relationship with God and that Jews are the chosen people. Furthermore, it can claim to be the original religion that has preceded and religiously influenced both Christianity and Islam. The Christians can claim that the Jewish religion was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus who is the Messiah. But Jesus was more than the Christ of which the Jewish scriptures talked about. He was God incarnate and in him, the eternal purposes of God for humankind

were revealed. Islam, from its side, can claim to be the final and conclusive revelation of God, and that Muhammad was the last in a long line of Jewish and Christian prophets. It can claim that the other two religions have corrupted their scriptures and, therefore, the only true records of the Torah for Moses and the “Injeel,” the Gospel of Jesus, are to be found in the Qur’an.

Based on these and other beliefs, each of the three religions in our area has historically crystallized its view of the two others and educated its people accordingly. And so long as such held beliefs remain within the parochial walls of the religion, they remain harmless. In the long history of the Middle East, such teachings were deemed necessary in order to boost the morale of the people, to entrench them in their faith, to make them feel religiously superior, and to guard and protect their religion against any scandalous defections. But so long as the debate remained limited to the faithful, it was benign.

Beliefs that undermine the other religions can become acute and dangerous whenever any of the three religions acquire political power vis-à-vis the state. This is precisely what has happened with each of the three religions over the last 2000 years. Although each religious community can try to present a case and show that its ancestors in power at the time were more tolerant than the other religious group when they possessed power, it is true to say that the overall record of all of them is not, to say the least, inspiring. As I have indicated above, the Byzantine and Crusader Christians did not show much toleration in their rule over Palestine. Neither did the Muslims, whether Arab or non-Arab, in their long rule which started in the 7th century and ended with the Ottomans in the 20th century — with the exception of the Crusader period.

As for the Jews, they have enjoyed power since 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel. Although the government of Israel has not been religious per se, the religious parties, especially since the end of the 1970s have exerted a considerable influence. In fact, as I have mentioned before, due to the political clout of the religious parties, Zionism itself has been transformed into a religious form that is more fundamentalist and extreme than secular Zionism. In many cases, the state has been the servant of religious Zionism, and religion was also used in the service of the state. It has given the Jewish religion an edge over the other religions while promoting itself as the most enlightened and tolerant in its rule with all that preceded it.

We, as Palestinians, have observed the intolerance in the interplay between religion and politics on so many different levels — in the building and expansion of the settlements, in the construction of the Separation Wall, in the division of the city of Hebron and the division of Ibrahimi Mosque, in the uprooting of olive trees, in the demolition of Palestinian homes, in the confiscation of Palestinian land, in the Judaization of the city of Jerusalem, in denying residency rights to Palestinians in Jerusalem, and so much more.

The point which I am trying to emphasize is this. Whenever one of the three monotheistic religions in the Middle East, with all its latent prejudice against the other two religions, gained a political advantage, it behaved with a good measure of intolerance. Moreover, it might seem to the reader that I have excused the indigenous Christians of the Middle East because they never enjoyed political power and, therefore, cannot be accused of practicing intolerance. I must hasten to mention that the experience of Lebanon would contradict that. When Lebanese Christians enjoyed political power, they too behaved with intolerance against non-Christians. I am

therefore convinced that the two major sources for intolerance in our area have to do with an inherent basic concept of God which undermines the outsider, and the measure of political power which that religion enjoys in society.

The View of the “Other” in the Three Religions

Out of an understanding of their faith, both Judaism and Islam have codified a basis for dealing with the other who did not share the same faith. Christianity, so far as the New Testament is concerned, and as far as I know, has not done that. So, we must dig deeper into discovering Christianity’s view of the other. Let me draw your attention to the religious concepts which I feel are relevant in this regard.

In Judaism: Ger toshav

In the case of Judaism, and starting with ancient Israelite religion, it was the concept of the *ger* the sojourner, stranger, or alien, or *ger toshav*, resident alien (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 23:22). He or she is a person who lives on the land but the land does not belong to them. They are Gentiles who are dependent on Israel’s charity, hospitality, and protection. Presumably, they are subordinate to Jews, and yet there are laws that stipulate that they should be dealt with kindly and even judged by the same laws as an Israelite (Deuteronomy 1:16). In the Talmud, there are special laws regarding the *ger* who lives in the “land of Israel.” Jewish tradition recognized that there is also a difference between living with Gentiles outside the land and living with them in *Erez Yisrael*. These laws, for example, forbid Jews, in the land, to sell immovable property, fields, and houses to Gentiles.⁶

Since Jews believe that God has given them the land of Canaan

6 Israel Shahak, *Jewish History*, Jewish Religion. London, 1994, p. 90.

as an inheritance, it is theirs in a special and unique way. In the biblical story of the conquest of the land of Canaan, the Israelites tried, under “God’s” order, to destroy the people of the land. There are a few horrific stories to that effect and a number of texts that reflect very racist material.⁷ When that proved to be impossible to accomplish, the concept of the alien, the *ger*, was applied in accordance with their basic tenet that God had given the land exclusively to the Israelites. Incredibly, the indigenous people of the land became the strangers and aliens, and the occupiers and colonizers considered themselves as the real owners of the land and the truly indigenous. Incidentally, the same thing has been practiced by the state of Israel since 1948.

It is worth noting that after the Exile, God exhorts the returning Jews to give the *ger* an equal inheritance just as the native Israelite.

So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 47:21-23)

Be that as it may, since the Torah, according to religious Jews, has a greater divine authority over the prophetic material, the *ger* continued to be considered, using today’s language, as a second-class resident. Ezekiel’s words reflected a greater measure of tolerance than was allowed before. It also reflected a greater measure of realism on the part of the returning Israelites whose experience during

⁷ See Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism; A Moral Critique*, London: Continuum International Publishing, 1977.

the Babylonian captivity outside the land must have expanded their understanding of God. I believe that this in itself shows a greater tolerance in the development of religious thought within Jewish religion at the time, and stands in great contrast with the exclusive language which was used at the conquest of Canaan after the Exodus from Egypt.

Today, religious people in the state of Israel see the concept of the *ger* as still binding on non-Jews who live in the land of Israel, especially the Palestinians. Since 1967, and the rise of the Gush Emunim movement, the force behind building the settlements on the West Bank and Gaza, their leaders have said that the way the Palestinians should be treated is very much dependent on Jewish power. If Jews have sufficient power, then it is their religious duty to expel the Palestinians.⁸ The point is that according to the Halakha,⁹ non-Jews are the strangers on the land. In light of the political conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, some might see it as an understandable problem. Yet, a look at the status of Palestinian Israeli Arabs who have lived in Israel since the inception of the Jewish state in 1948 would show that the citizenship which they have been granted makes them only resident aliens rather than full nationals. That is why they have always been considered as second-class citizens, a concept which is not far from being a stranger on the land.

It is fascinating to investigate this concept much deeper than I have time to do in this paper. Obviously, this concept is not used when Jews live as minorities outside the area which they consider as *Erez Yisrael*. But once they are in the land of Israel, which they would

8 Shahak, p. 91

9 The Halakha is the legal system of classical Judaism which is primarily based on the Babylonian Talmud and is maintained today as Orthodox Judaism.

consider their own, those who are not Jewish would automatically fall under the category of the *ger*. Strictly speaking, therefore, the religion itself, Judaism, can offer the non-Jew the status of the *ger* in Israel. Practically speaking, although religious political parties exercise a good measure of political clout, the people of the land, whether Jewish or Arab, are not governed by Jewish religious law. Since Israel still does not have a constitution, it is governed by a set of basic laws that are a conglomerate of Turkish and British, as well as Israeli legislation that has been enacted by the Knesset to suit the political need of the country.

An important footnote must be mentioned. The recognized religious communities in the land enjoy special status. This goes back to Ottoman law in which the different communities were given special status under the millet system.¹⁰ They can govern their own community in matters of personal status, i.e., marriage, divorce, annulment, separation, inheritance, etc. This can be seen as a sign of religious tolerance but in a democratic system of government, it is not acceptable. In Islamic countries, this is subject to the laws of the state where, at times, the Sharia law must be applied. Many Jewish women do not like to submit themselves to these religious courts because they consider the halakhic laws biased towards men and do not give them the justice they seek.

In Islam: Abl Al-Thimmah

Islam had to deal with people who did not accept the message of Muhammad from the very beginning. With the rapid expansion of Islam, it was critical to find the appropriate formula that could

10 In the Ottoman Empire, a millet was an independent court of law pertaining to "personal law" under which a religious community was allowed to rule itself under its own laws.

govern and regulate the relationship with non-Muslims. The Muslims refer to Jews and Christians as *Ahl Al-Thimma*. The word itself in Arabic could mean a pledge or a guarantee of safety and protection. It means that non-Muslims living under Muslim rule and in Muslim countries come under the protection of the Muslim state. Since they do not enjoy full status like the Muslims, they fall under the protection and guardianship of Muslims. Indeed, they must pay a certain tax which Muslims do not pay. In other words, strictly speaking, Islam, as a religion dominant in the Arab Middle East, offers its non-Muslims the status of *Ahl Al-Thimma*, the people who live under the protection of Islam. One of the problems which is bound in this concept has to do with the popular definition of the word Arab itself. Among many Muslims, especially the religious, the word Arab has become synonymous with being a Muslim. This obviously adds another dimension to the whole issue of intolerance in religion. Indigenous Christians in the Middle East consider themselves Arab. They point to the historic fact that even before there were Arab Muslims in Arabia there existed a number of Arab tribes who were already Christian.

In 1998, Sabeel Center for Liberation Theology held its third international conference in Bethlehem. Approximately 900 people participated in the five-day conference, about one-third of them internationals and two-thirds local Palestinians. Besides the majority of Christian speakers, we had a few Muslim and Jewish scholars. One of the prominent Muslim sheikhs in the Palestinian community on the West Bank was invited to speak on the subject of "Religious Fundamentalism - A Muslim Perspective." After his presentation, he asked me to come forward to the podium and proudly presented me with a large framed copy of "Al-'ohdah al 'omarieh." This is a very historic document which 'Omar Ibn Al-Khattab gave to Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem in AD 638

when the city of Jerusalem surrendered to the Arab Muslims. It is a wonderful document in which the Khalif ‘Omar gives his promise to respect the rights of the Christians in the city of Jerusalem and guarantees their protection. Although in its historical context this document represented progressive and enlightened ideas that reflected respect and reverence for another religion, it cannot and should not be applicable today in the 21st century. The citizens of a truly democratic state must not be dependent for their security and well-being on the mercy and benevolence of a governor, or the majority population, no matter how tolerant they can be. Every citizen, regardless of ethnic, religious, or secular background, must be protected by the democratic laws and constitution of the state in which they live. These laws must be in line with international law.

In Christianity *The “Other” as an Object of Evangelism*

The New Testament has no concept of a Christian state and I have not been able to find a concept in the formative years of the Christian faith that identified the other as did Judaism and Islam. As already mentioned, the Christian faith did not enjoy any political clout during the first 300 years. It did not confine itself to any particular geographic location and did not dominate any other group. On the contrary, the early believers were themselves persecuted by both the Jewish religious establishment of the day as well as the Roman authorities. Jesus’ ministry was largely preoccupied with an inclusive concept of the Kingdom of God rather than one land. His disciples were commissioned to take the Gospel into all the world. Some scholars have pointed to a great discrepancy between the life and teachings of Jesus and later Christianity.¹¹

11 Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity*. Orbis, 1987.

In the teachings of Jesus, one can discover great tolerance for the other. Even the enemy must be treated as a neighbor. It is interesting to point to the similarity between the word *ger* in Hebrew and the word *jar* in Arabic. *Jar* means neighbor. In other words, the stranger becomes a neighbor even if he or she was an enemy. Christendom was launched when the Christian faith was adopted by the Roman Empire. The closest concept that I can think of has to do with evangelism. The early church saw the “other” as an object of mission. In the early stages of the spread of the faith, it was believed that the faster the faith spread, the quicker would be the return of Christ and the end of the world. In the language of the 19th century great missionary movement, the “other” was lost and going to hell and needed to be evangelized so that he or she could be saved. As mentioned above, however, no sooner had the Christian faith been tolerated and accepted by Constantine, than we see the church being plagued with internal theological controversies regarding the person of Christ himself. The other became largely the heretic who was anathematized and persecuted.

The Religious Dilemma

Finding an Inclusive Concept of God

From a religious perspective of life in the Middle East, the concepts of *ger* and *Ahl Al-Thimma* are what Judaism and Islam consecutively can offer the outsider today. When judged against their times, both concepts reflect a good measure of religious tolerance and openness to the outsider. But they are not sufficient in today's world, neither are they satisfactory in today's Middle East. They are religiously and morally limiting when viewed from the position of the other religion and, therefore, democratically unacceptable. Yet change, if any, has to come from within every religion itself. The challenges are enormous and perennial. The choices are clear. Either a religion would have to simply and pragmatically ignore those beliefs which are intolerant of the other and indefinitely suspend them, or push them to the heavenly realm—as, for example, the Mormons have done with the question of polygamy. Or even better, offer a new religious interpretation that does not conflict with religious toleration towards the other. Unless a religion can acquire within itself hermeneutical tools which can help it address contemporary concerns and so accept to subject its own religious tradition to scientific methods of study, it cannot meet the increasing challenges facing religion in today's Middle Eastern society. That religion can, presumably, live and administer its life of faith with its people, but hopefully, it will never assume political power. To assume power is to be religiously disastrous to many of its own people who do not accept its antiquated theology as well as terribly intolerant against those on the outside who do not share its beliefs.

As I have indicated before, in our Israeli and Palestinian context,

as well as in the Middle East, this issue of intolerance has to do with how we understand God. It touches, therefore, the heart of religion. To appeal these days to the “romantic” cliché that we all believe in one God, and imagine that intolerance will miraculously disappear, will not work. The problem does not lie in the fact that the three religions believe in one God. The difficulty lies in whether we believe in the **same** one God. It is not enough to say that the one God has created us all. We must go on to say that God does not differentiate or discriminate between us, but treats us equally and that God’s love embraces us all whether we consider ourselves children or servants of God. Our theology of God must be changed, otherwise, we are destined to a life of prejudice, intolerance, and religious hypocrisy.

Applying Scientific Methods of Study

In order to find solutions, many people from the adherents of the three religions in the Middle East have found some ways out. For some, secularism has been an answer. Others have submitted their holy books to scientific study. They have applied historical, archaeological, and textual, as well as other scientific methods of study to these texts. Such a study has helped to reveal the kernel and essence of faith while removing much of what was legendary and which has accumulated over the centuries. It has helped to differentiate the temporal and more conditioned from the more lasting and permanent tenets of the faith. It has forced people to consider the deeper issues of religion that concern themselves with justice, truth, mercy, peace, and reconciliation. It has helped to open up religion towards the outsider and obliterate much of the prejudice and racism which plagued it.

In the case of Christianity, many traditionalist Christians thought

that this critical study would destroy the faith. Some Christians still resist it. I believe that Christianity emerged much stronger as a result. The same has happened to many within the Jewish community. It certainly has not taken place within most of the Orthodox Jewish community in Israel which is the most influential politically. To a large extent, it has not taken place in Islam. Indeed, there have been dissenting voices but no movement of any significance has emerged. As things stand today, in both Judaism and Islam in the Middle East, the people who are close to the powers and have the authority to effect change, are those who still hold to a fundamentalist view which is detrimental to toleration.

The Challenge of Democracy and Pluralism to Religion in the Middle East

It is important to point to the continuous tension between the state and religion in the Middle East. Generally speaking, in the case of Islam, none of the Muslim countries are strictly following Shari'a law. Indeed, they are Islamic countries and Islam is the religion of the state but their laws are not totally based on Islam. The same applies to Israel. It is a Jewish state but it does not govern according to the Halakha, the legal system of Orthodox Judaism. Nevertheless, they have not arrived at constitutional democracy that guarantees equal liberty to all of their citizens. Such a statement does not apply to the Christian community in Palestine since it has no political power.

The crucial question is how, then, can these religions live with democracy. It is true to say that democracy can live with religion but many times, religion cannot live with democracy. Yet, religion cannot exist anymore in hegemony. Everywhere, people of mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds are living together. The only way

forward is for the existence of an inclusive and pluralistic society. There are two points in this regard. The first has to do with the relationship between religion and international conventions, and the second has to do with the question of pluralism.

International Conventions and Declarations

Since 1948, a good number of international conventions have been produced by the UN and its agencies that guard against various kinds of discrimination. One of those is the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Religious Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief (1981). These declarations and conventions represent for me the best that humankind, in its best moments of objectivity, have produced. Although it is only a declaration and lacks the nature of an international agreement, it has succeeded in articulating the freedom of fundamental rights of religion and beliefs. Article four of the Declaration states:

1. All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, political, social and cultural life.
2. All States shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any such discrimination, and to take all appropriate measures to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or other beliefs in this matter.

As I have indicated already, the problem really lies when the state which is Jewish or Islamic, due to political or religious reasons, does not wish to implement the above declarations. Theologically for me, God is speaking today through these international Declarations and Conventions more than through some of our religious beliefs and practices. God, I believe, is the source and inspiration of anything that promotes universal respect and understanding

among people, works for justice and peace, and for the elimination of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. It is important, therefore, to champion and support these Declarations and Conventions and hold the governments of our Middle Eastern countries accountable.

Equal Liberty and the Intolerant

In this section, I would like to emphasize that justice as fairness provides equal liberty for all. Ideally, for us in the Middle East, we need democratic states that guarantee freedom of religion rather than the more restrictive sense of freedom of worship. In my own view, freedom of worship is a toleration while freedom of religion is a basic right and liberty. With freedom of religion, one is free to believe or not believe, to belong to any religion he or she chooses, and even to change it. Freedom of worship, on the other hand, imprisons people and keeps them intact within their religious community. It is a residue of the Ottoman millet system which many of us dislike.

What we long for is a constitutional form of democracy that guarantees equal liberty for all. Since, as a Christian community, we live in a Jewish or Islamic state where religious political parties impact that state, intolerance will be exacerbated, and it is quite unlikely that we can enjoy equal liberty. What we must continue to strive for is a constitutional democracy that will guarantee equal rights for all citizens. In essence, as a Palestinian Christian, I do not want to live in my country as a second class citizen which is a contemporary version of the *ger*, nor as part of *Ahl Al-Thimma*, which is still talked about, in a Muslim state.

In the 21st century, I think all people deserve protection by a democratic constitution that guarantees them equal liberty. If out of their religious basis, the three religions in our area can eliminate any prejudice towards the other, it is well and good. If not, then it is the responsibility of the state to arrive at a solution. If the state refuses to grant equal liberty, it will, indeed, be a disaster and the

struggle must continue. I am not sure whether it is at all possible that a state can be both Islamic or Jewish and still be fully democratic, granting equal liberty to all its citizens. Presumably, this is possible if the religious designation of the state refers to demography rather than to its legal makeup. I mention this because it is a perennial question. Although I prefer the elimination of these religious designations, I can live with them so long as the rest of the citizens of the state who are not Jewish in Israel and who are not Muslim in Palestine, or any of the Arab countries, would enjoy full constitutional democracy that guarantees them equal justice and liberty. It is important, therefore, to call attention to John Rawls's definition of justice and liberty.

First Principle - Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Priority Rule - The principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order and therefore liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty. There are two cases: (a) a less extensive liberty must strengthen the total system of liberty shared by all, and (b) a less than equal liberty must be acceptable to those citizens with the lesser liberty.¹²

In the context of the Middle East where Christians live either in an Islamic state or a Jewish state, and assuming that the state wants to act justly, to what extent can it tolerate the religiously intolerant? Since religious freedom is derived from the principle of equal liberty, the only ground to limit that liberty is for the sake of avoiding a greater injustice and a greater loss of that liberty. In other words, "the limitation of liberty is justified only when it is necessary for liberty itself, to prevent an invasion of freedom that

12 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, 1980, p. 250.

would be still worse.” It is only the liberty of the intolerant which is to be limited and this is done for the sake of equal liberty under a just constitution.¹³

13 Rawls, pp. 211-221.

Pluralism

It is important, though briefly, to address the issue of religious pluralism. Some scholars of religion have classified the diversity of religious beliefs as exclusive, inclusive, or pluralist. The exclusivists are considered the most religiously intolerant, the inclusivists the more tolerant, and the pluralists the most tolerant.¹⁴ From a Middle Eastern perspective, there is a need to re-define pluralism. This need is called for in order to allow every religion the possibility of openness without being judged as narrow and intolerant. In the mind of many people, religious pluralism presupposes “liberalism, which involves compromise, accommodation, and the dismantling of distinctive traditional convictions.”¹⁵

Pluralism is a good word but for us, it should be defined as the ability for the three religions to live side by side with full mutual respect. We do not need to make a value judgment on any of the religions or give any of them a higher claim on the truth, or even claim that pluralism makes them all equally valid religiously. Pluralism simply makes them acknowledge the fact that they have to live and exist in a society that is pluralistic in nature, i.e., it contains more than one religion and makes room for the existence of other religions. Within that religion, the believers are free to believe whatever their religion prescribes regarding God or others. They are even free to believe that their religion is the more superior of all. But they must respect the presence of religious diversity in the same society, and that other religions are equally entitled to the same religious freedom as they are. Any religion is, therefore,

14 Peter Donovan, “*The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism*” in *Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol 29, No.2, June 1993.

15 Donovan, p. 218.

free to hold any set of beliefs even if they totally contradict the set of beliefs of the other religion so long as no infringement on another religion takes place. Once the infringement occurs, the state must put an end to the intolerance. In this sense, pluralism does not take the three religions and try to “absorb them all into a rational uniformity;” it allows them to live in peace and respect alongside each other.¹⁶

16 Donovan, p.222.

Beyond Toleration: Mutual Trust and Acceptance

Ultimately, toleration is not sufficient anymore. In the mind of many people, toleration does not include acceptance of the other but mere permission, indulgence, and allowance. We must aspire to a life in which religious people can go beyond toleration to acceptance. Toleration is a step in the right direction which a religious majority generously grants to a religious minority living in its midst. In modern civil society, religious toleration cannot be a satisfactory goal. On the religious level, we must push for full acceptance and respect of the other, and allow the other religion to define itself in its own terms. On the political level, we must work for equal liberty.

By doing so, we will be going beyond toleration into mutual trust and acceptance. Indeed, we can understand the whole concept of equal liberty as stemming from our understanding of a loving God who knows no discrimination or prejudice and who wills that all humans live in equal freedom and liberty.

Liberation Theology as a Test for Authentic Religion

Dedicated to Gustavo Guitiérrez

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek

**Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology
Center**

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Note to the Reader

I wrote this article in 2007 for the Festschrift volume that the friends of Gustavo Gutiérrez published in his honor on the occasion of his 80th birthday. At that time, it was translated into Spanish by Dr. Samuel Pagán and published. I decided to publish it in English because it addresses an important subject that is still very relevant to our Palestinian religious situation, especially regarding the three major monotheistic religions in Palestine-Israel. With the help of friends, I was able to update, edit, and expand the original article. I dedicate it in honor of my friend, Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology.

The Context for Liberation

In 1948, a grave injustice was committed against the Palestinian people. Many forces coalesced to carry out this project. Besides the Zionist Jewish forces that perpetrated the catastrophe, Britain and the United States, as well as other countries, provided the political and international legal support. Ilan Pappé, an Israeli Jewish historian, described the catastrophe in the preface to his book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.

Once the decision was taken, it took six months to complete the mission. When it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighbourhoods emptied of their inhabitants. The plan decided upon on 10 March 1948, and above all its systematic implementation in the following months, was a clear-cut case of an ethnic cleansing operation, regarded under international law today as a crime against humanity.¹

This led to the establishment of the state of Israel on May 15, 1948, on 78% of the area of Palestine. In a subsequent war in 1967, the Israeli army occupied the rest of Palestine, the remaining 22%. Since then the government of Israel has been confiscating Palestinian land, building settlements for exclusive Jewish use — illegal under international law — dissecting the Palestinian areas through hundreds of checkpoints that prevent freedom of movement for the Palestinian people within their own territories, subjecting the Palestinians to insult, humiliation, and even torture. Israel has been denying the Palestinians their human and political rights and refusing all along to implement the many resolutions of the United Nations to end its occupation and allow the Palestinians to

establish their own state alongside the state of Israel. The continued violence and terrorism of the government of Israel have been often met with Palestinian popular resistance groups, largely through nonviolent direct action. It is within this political context that a Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) emerged to address this oppressive situation from the position of faith.

The Theologies at Play in Israel-Palestine

Generally speaking, most Palestinians, including Muslims and Christians, have never heard of liberation theology. Obviously, they know the word liberation and long to see it realized in their country. But a theology that liberates has not been part of their experience. On the contrary, the theologies and ideologies practiced against the Palestinians have always been oppressive.

There are four major observable “theologies” at play in the conflict over Palestine. In most cases, the word “theology” is not used, but from my observation, the word “theology” fits very well.

Theology of domination and oppression.

This state theology is expressed in Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. Over three and a half million Palestinians — Muslims and Christians — are living under an oppressive Israeli occupation. This occupation manifests itself through state violence and terrorism on a daily basis. It oppresses, humiliates, and separates Palestinians from each other on different sides of the apartheid wall. It confiscates Palestinian land, uproots olive trees, and creates havoc in the daily lives of the Palestinians.

There are dangerous subsidiaries to this theology. These are expressed through religious Jewish Zionist settlers and their many religious friends. It is equally found in the theologies of western Christian Zionists who support the theology of domination on the basis of their interpretation of the Bible. There are also millions of Christians from mainline churches who are ignorant of Israeli injustices

against the Palestinians, and who support Israel because they believe that this is the proper Christian stance.

This is the dominant theology in the conflict. It is the theology that is based on military power. Essentially this constitutes the theology of empire. Many people today, including Palestinians, believe that we are living under an American Empire and that Israel is one of its strongest satellites.²

The God of empire is the god of war and violence. For many Christian biblicists³ in this camp, it is the same god that was active in many stories within the Old Testament. Those who espouse this theology believe that all the land belongs to the Jewish people and must not be shared with the Palestinians.⁴ And if God used violence and war to protect “his people” in the Old Testament, then what Israel is doing to the Palestinians today must also be acceptable to God.

Millions of western Christian Zionists promote such a biblical theology and are blind supporters of Israel while they are adamantly against the Palestinians.⁵ These people consider the Palestinians to be the biblical Canaanites whose expulsion and/or extermination was mandated by God.⁶ They stand with Israel today because they believe this is what God wants them to do. In this sense, the Bible itself has been wrongly used as an instrument of oppression against the Palestinians. Their theology of liberation includes only

2 Rosemary Radford Ruether. *America, Amerikka: Elect Nation and Imperial Violence* (Equinox Publications, 2007).

3 In this context, I am using the term “biblicist” as a person who interprets the Bible literally.

4 Evangelical Leaders’ Letter to President Bush, July 27, 2007.

5 Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer. *Is Religion Killing Us?* (New York, 2003).

6 As examples, see Deuteronomy 7 and 20.

the Jewish people, whom they believe are the legitimate inheritors of the land, while the Palestinians are totally excluded.

Theology of the armed struggle

In the history of humankind, most resistance movements against injustice and oppression have used violence. In the face of violence, most people instinctively turn to violence. Even when they know that the odds are against them and that they can never win against the enemy, they use the armed struggle to create a balance of terror so that their adversary does not enjoy any security or peace. The history of the armed struggle against the Israeli occupation has never totally stopped since the beginning of the conflict. Though the gap between the military strength of Israel and the strength of the armed resistance groups has always been huge, it has persisted and never ceased, especially with some Palestinian groups such as Hamas and others.

For many years, both Palestinian Muslims and Christians were engaged in the armed struggle. Since the second *intifada* of 2000, commonly referred to as the *Al-Aqsa intifada*, there has been an “Islamization”⁷ of the armed struggle to a large extent. The Islamists⁸ believe that they are fighting for the cause of God. There is a basic theology that underpins their actions. Palestine, for them, is an integral part of the Muslim world. It is a *Waqf*, Muslim Trust, placed in their hands by God, and it includes the holy city of Jerusalem which is the third holiest city in Islam. They must

7 Islamization is the process of a society's shift towards the religion of Islam and becoming Muslims. In contemporary usage, it may refer to the perceived imposition of an Islamist social and political system on a society with an indigenously different social and political background.

8 An Islamist is an advocate or supporter of Islamic militancy or fundamentalism.

liberate it and if they are killed in the process, they die as martyrs for the sake of God, and paradise is their reward.

Religious Muslims quote the Qur'an and other sacred writings to prove that their present sufferings, domination, and oppression are all predicted, and due to their straying and drifting from the straight path of God. They need to accept this painful period of humiliation and turn to God in repentance. Eventually, they will be victorious, and God will vindicate them against their enemies. The number of Muslims who go to the mosques to say their prayers has noticeably grown since the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Although the armed resistance was once practiced by many Palestinian factions, one observes more recently that those who insist on it are becoming fewer. The two most rabid movements that are adamantly maintaining it are Hamas and al-Jihad al-Islami, as well as some smaller factions. For these groups, the struggle is both religious and ideological.

Theology of resignation and withdrawal

This passive theology is practiced by different segments of the Palestinian community, both Muslim and Christian. Some Palestinians have accepted the status quo and benefited from it. Others wait on God to effect change and render justice in God's own time.

Theology of nonviolence

There are Palestinian Christians who have always opted for nonviolent resistance and believed in its power and importance. For some, it is a matter of principle which stems from their faith. They could not reconcile the armed struggle with their faith in Christ. Sabeel, the Ecumenical Liberation Theology movement, represents this

position. It has advocated nonviolent resistance since its inception. Other Palestinian Christians and Muslims have turned to nonviolence for pragmatic or strategic reasons and are quite active in promoting it. Jewish peace activists, such as B'Tselem, Ta'ayush, Breaking the Silence, Women in Black, Zochrot, Rabbis for Human Rights, ICAHD, Machsom Watch, Coalition of Women for Peace, Jewish Voice for Peace, Independent Jewish Voices (Canada), and others, working alongside Palestinians in the struggle for justice and peace have also promoted nonviolence. On the Palestinian side, there have been many groups who have been using nonviolent methods of resistance against the occupation such as Youth Against Settlements, Stop the Wall, Tent of Nations, Palestinian Museum of Natural History, Wi'am, Ni'lin, Bilin, and Kfar Qaddum, to name a few. Moreover, international groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), and others have been living among the Palestinians, advocating and witnessing the power of nonviolence.

The Greatest Theological Obstacle to Peace

Not all nonviolent action is faith-based. Many of its proponents are secular. By and large, most of those who are committed either stand on the side of the state theology of domination and oppression, or on the side of armed resistance. In the Israel-Palestine conflict, both Judaism and Islam have been used in the service of the armed struggle. Christians know that it is difficult to reconcile the gospel of Christ with violence. Others, whether people of faith or secular — Christians, Muslims, and Jews — who did not turn to the armed struggle, have contributed much in their writings, speaking, and active political participation. Examples include Edward Said, Mubarak Awad, Noam Chomsky, Uri Avnery, Ilan Pappé, Norman Finkelstein, Sheikh Zuhair Dib'ie, Nafez Assaily, and Iyad Burnat.

In the church in Palestine a good number of clergy from the various denominations of the land have been involved in the nonviolent struggle for justice, peace, and liberation, by lifting their prophetic voices — whether in active peaceful resistance or through their writing and speaking.

Generally speaking, this conflict has bankrupted the three religions. They have had nothing of significance to contribute. Each of them has played a despicable role. One can even say that religion has been part of the problem and failed to be part of the solution. What then is the central theological obstacle that has stood in the way? Without any hesitation, the greatest obstacle has to do with these religion's theology of God. When our theology of God is wrong, inevitably our theology of neighbor is automatically wrong, and vice versa. On the practical level, it is easier to examine a person's

theology of neighbor because it is more visible. When our theology of neighbor is deficient, we know that our theology of God is equally flawed and deficient. As people of faith, it is our theology of God that determines our theology of neighbor, and if we want to help people change their theology of neighbor, we must address their theology of God. And if our theology of God is based on our sacred texts, which we interpret literally and must not be tampered with, then our theology of God is rigid and inflexible, and we are tragically stuck.

In our Middle Eastern context, when we are relating to people of faith, whether Muslims, Jews, or Christians and especially those who are religiously conservative, traditional or fundamentalist, the underlying problem stems from their understanding of God. Depending on how narrow and closed, or open and inclusive, our concept of God is determines and defines how we arrive at solutions to interfaith conflicts and political and socio-economic problems that face our communities.

What is quite clear is that the three Abrahamic faiths, or as some call them, the three monotheistic religions, have found themselves totally immersed together in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is important to remember that the conflict did not originate as a religious one. It began as a political conflict. Over the years, however, religion has become an integral part of it, and today, its clearest expression.

Since people believe that religion has an important role to play in peacemaking, and rightly so, it is expected that these three religions that claim Abraham as a common ancestor would make a valuable contribution in that regard. Indeed, the conflict over Palestine has become a test case for religious authenticity. For example: Is

religion able to find a resolution to the conflict on the basis of our belief/faith in the One God — the God of peace that satisfies the demands of justice and peace? I can even say that the conflict over Palestine has presented a unique opportunity and a wonderful challenge for the religious leaders of the three religions to apply themselves, speak prophetically, and produce the guidelines for peace based on their loyalty and obedience to the One God.

However, what transpired as a result of this conflict has been tragically disappointing. This fierce political conflict led the adherents of the three religions to clash on the platform of Palestine, and when they clashed, their religions clashed. Judaism, by and large, was hijacked by Zionism and became the servant of the state of Israel, and later its Jewish religious extremists proved to be more vicious, brutish and savage in destroying and oppressing the Palestinians than the secular Zionist ideology had done. It presented its faith as centered in a national god who has returned to Palestine to claim “his” peoples’ rightful inheritance and to fight by their side in order to redeem the land from the hands of the modern-day Canaanites and Amalekites — the Palestinian Arabs. Their inspiration came from the violent texts found in the books of Joshua, Judges, and others. Their tribal god bears no resemblance to the great God which Judaism believes in, the God of justice and mercy.

Islam similarly invoked its own tribal god who also claimed exclusive rights to the whole region of the Middle East, including Palestine. Muslims felt bewildered and puzzled with the success of the Zionist project that grabbed and appropriated huge parts of “their” land. And so, with their god, they were willing to go to war and pick up the armed struggle. Like the Israeli Jews, instead of appealing to the higher tenets of their faith, they used the most primitive concepts of god, and inevitably these tribal gods clashed.

The case of Palestinian Christianity was different. Palestinian Christians were caught up in theological schizophrenia. On the one hand, between an Old Testament theology — certain parts of it — that could throw us back into the bosom of a tribal god, the god of Joshua, that could justify our violence and bless our wars, and, on the other hand, a New Testament theology of God, in Jesus Christ, who modeled for us a new way of love, peace and nonviolence. Indeed, the Nakba left us with conflicting feelings of betrayal, bafflement, and confusion in front of the immensity of evil that devoured our Palestinian homeland.

As for Christianity, instead of hearing the cry of condemnation and lament from Christian leaders from around the world, there was, generally speaking, a deafening silence. The three monotheistic religions failed to play a positive role in contributing to a resolution of the conflict. They, like their adherents, only became victims of it. I can even say that Palestine stands at the crossroads of the world. In its arena, the three major monotheistic religions faced each other, challenged by an obstinate conflict. Instead of rising to the challenge in a quest to find peace that could benefit all the people of the land, instead of bringing their people closer to peace, they contributed to their further alienation. Their religions and their faiths did not prove strong enough to stop the conflict or achieve peace. Does this make the word monotheism a misnomer that must be challenged and even discarded? Does it make a sham of our monotheistic faiths? Are we, in fact, looking at three religions where each believes in its own One God but not in the **same** One God? The assumption of many of our people is that the three religions believe in the same One God. That is why people refer to them as “the three monotheistic religions.”

At closer observance, however, and watching the behavior and

interaction of people with one another, it is obvious that we do not share a faith in the same One God. Otherwise, we would see greater respect among the followers of the three religions, and greater progress in achieving peace. On the contrary, our religions are part of the problem and not of the solution. In other words, one would presume that our faith in the same One God, who demands justice and peace for all, would bring us closer together, and would be a strong catalyst and impetus to help us find a solution to our tragic conflict. Since this has not happened, it throws doubt on our professed monotheistic faiths. We have failed to transcend our selfishness and greed as well as our narrow nationalist concerns. Palestine-Israel is the only platform in the world where these three monotheistic religions meet in conflict and where the conflict has tested their theologies of justice and peace and found them wanting.

Here, we need to distinguish between religion and its adherents. The crucial question is: what does religion say about the conflict, and where does God stand on the issue of peace? If we believe in the same One God, our religions would presumably lift up, at least, a common vision for peace that pleases the One true God. Our religions would clearly name the injustice and the evil that have been perpetrated. It would suggest ways for a just solution to be accomplished while, at the same time, exercising mercy and compassion. If religion does not dare to speak prophetically against the injustice, it can easily be co-opted by the political powers, and become collaborative with them. Authentic religion must challenge its people with the word of God, and encourage them to transform their ideas and actions according to God's will, rather than to drag God down to the level of their greed and selfishness that usually leads to violence and war. Whenever our theology of God deteriorates to an extent that supports and justifies our prejudices, something is wrong with our theology.

Furthermore, we must candidly say that if our various sacred texts cannot reconcile our theology of the One God as the God who abhors injustice and evil, regardless of who the perpetrators are, something is drastically wrong. If our theology of God does not condemn the oppression and exploitation of all of God's children, then something is basically wrong with our monotheistic theology. If our concept of God as loving, compassionate, and merciful cannot be tested today by showing mercy and compassion for the other, even the enemy, then our religion has failed. If the God we believe in has nothing to say regarding our enemies except to kill them, there is something wrong with our theology. If our religion has nothing to say about the poor and the oppressed except to ignore and demonize them, we need to examine the authenticity of our theology of God and neighbor. If our religion has nothing to say about peace and security, except for ourselves, then our theology needs to be examined.

The tragedy of so many people in power today is that what they wish for themselves when they are weak, they are not willing to give to others when they become strong. And what we wish for ourselves when we are oppressed, we are not willing to give to others when we become oppressors. Liberation theology is concerned about both the oppressed and the oppressors. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez,

Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness. ... One loves the oppressors by liberating them from their inhuman condition as oppressors, by liberating them from themselves. But this cannot be achieved except by resolutely opting for the oppressed, that is, by combating the oppressive class. ... This is the challenge as new as the

Gospel: to love our enemies.⁹

Speaking from the center of my faith as a Christian, I can say that unless the God I believe in is a God who embraces the other, and cares for them as much as for me, this god cannot be the God of the universe who creates and loves us all. Unless each of our religions from its own theological basis can critique the violence and terrorism within it, and totally reject that God has anything to do with it, something is wrong with our understanding of God. As people of faith, we need to lift up a strong prophetic voice that reaches out to all people around us that the one God in whom we all believe is the God of justice, peace, love, mercy, and compassion, and there is no God besides this God. Unless we succeed in doing this, we are doomed and our religions will continue to keep us imprisoned within a system of antiquated theology that has no relevance to God or to our neighbors around us, and our religions cannot make a valuable contribution towards the resolutions of the endemic problems of our world today.

The genuine and authentic God is the God of justice and peace for all. God cannot be pleased when injustice is done against others. God cannot be pleased when any state dominates and oppresses others. Those who are oppressed must be set free, and those who live under the yoke of domination must be liberated. This includes the oppressed Palestinians. Our three religions believe in a liberator God. Can this liberator God lead us to peace? It would be wonderful if our religions could produce a peace formula that gives justice, peace, and security for all the people of the land. I believe that our monotheistic religions can still have a role to play. It demands of us both the will and the theology to do it.

Practically, this means that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian

9 Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1973), 275-6.

territories must end and the land must be shared. A Palestinian state must be established on all the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip alongside the state of Israel. The city of Jerusalem must be shared as two capitals for the two states. A just solution for the Palestinian refugees must be found based on International Law. All violence and terrorism must be abandoned, and the two governments and their peoples must work in cooperation together to develop the economic capacity of their countries for the well being of all of their peoples. I believe that the One God whom we all worship will be pleased with the doing of justice and the establishment of peace in the country that is dear to all of us so that we can live as neighbors, not as enemies, and respect our God-given humanity. It is only then that our three monotheistic religions can share a common witness to the greatness, sovereignty and love of the One God — the God of justice and peace.

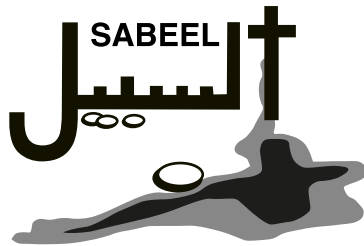
The **Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek** is a Palestinian Christian and co-founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. He is also the author of a number of books including *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* upon which the ministry of Sabeel is based.



Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. *Sabeel* strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, nonviolence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word ‘Sabeel’ is Arabic for ‘the way’ and also a ‘channel’ or ‘spring’ of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on *Friends of Sabeel* groups in your area please contact the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.



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