



“Promise, Land, and Hope”: An American Perspective on the Theological Project

30.11.2013 | Peter A. Pettit

Recently I had two conversations that will serve well to introduce the challenges we face when we approach the issues that swirl around the Jewish and Palestinian peoples and the land – which both peoples see as home and which Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all regard as holy.

One conversation took place with a colleague who has worked with us in the New Paths program of the Shalom Hartman Institute. The program is designed to build a new foundation on which American Christians can engage Israel. We released the first study course three weeks ago and this conversation took place the next day. We were trying to identify the most effective way to convey quickly to an audience that the approach we are taking is new and different. My colleague made a suggestion that was meant to do just that – to pull them away from the immediate conflict model and suggest another. She said: Ask the audience, just for a moment, to imagine that the UN Partition Plan had been accepted in 1947; that there had been no war and two independent, economically interlinked states had developed side by side as a Jewish homeland and an Arab homeland; that there was no 1967 war and no occupation.... She never got to finish. We gaped at her. Are you kidding? Ask a group of American Christians to imagine *that*?

The other conversation took place similarly in regard to the New Paths program, and also about how to introduce it. The colleagues with whom I was speaking are planning to teach the study course in the fall, and we were discussing how to advertise it and attract participants. They suggested advertising that it is for people who have never been to the Holy Land and do not have any fixed convictions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After all, they said, when a discussion involves people who have traveled there and people who have not, it's always the eyewitness account that gets played as the trump card: “Well, if you would ever go there and see, you would know exactly what I am talking about and why I am right.” It doesn't even matter whose cause the speaker is defending or promoting – the line works equally well on any side of the discussion. And it works to stop it cold.

In the first conversation – “imagine there were no conflict” – my colleague recognized that there is no realistic perspective from which one can start the conversation about the Promised Land and its current inhabitants without getting trapped in a box, labeled as a partisan in one camp or another, and embraced or dismissed on that label alone. Of course, we also knew immediately that her suggestion begged the question, since imagining there is no conflict will always work to the advantage of only one party in the conflict.

In the second conversation, the challenge is more clearly addressed when thinking about whom to invite into a discussion: how do people with radically different perspectives and experience in dealing with a situation find the ground on which they can engage one another? But the suggestion there – to advertise it only to those with limited experience – also begs the question, as it would simply send the two groups to their separate rooms.

Thus the question remains, and the challenge, which we all know too well from our own experience. My two conversations could be multiplied dozens of times over in this room, as so

many of us have found ourselves stymied in a conversation by a radical disjunction of experience, religious commitments, ethical imperatives, and even facts. Recently the ICCJ Executive Board responded to this challenge with its statement, [“As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope,”](#) and previously it has addressed the tendency toward acrimony and polarization with its 2010 statement, [“Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words”](#). Both statements affirm the importance of dialogue as a path to clearer communication and understanding. The more recent one helpfully reminds us that dialogue is not about “conversion.” In the context of Israel and Palestine, “conversion” can mean converting the other to a policy position or moral posture, usually moreso than it means religious conversion. But the implicit aggression of the conversionary approach is just as present and is felt just as strongly. By contrast, dialogue always involves “an openness to changing our own hearts because of what we have learned from the hearts of our conversation partners” (“As long as you believe...,” §7).

It is in the interest of empowering dialogue and this kind of learning in this highly conflicted setting that the ICCJ Research Council has taken up its project of “Promise, Land, and Hope.” The three-part title of the project is more than a rhetorical flourish, and certainly not a poorly-disguised Trinitarian reference. Rather, it lifts up the three key elements that seem to stand at the heart of the conflict between the Jewish and the Palestinian peoples over the land they both call home. For Jews and Christians, it is a *promised* land, or at least has been understood as such and is represented as such in scripture; what one makes of that is a key issue. It focuses on *land* because both the Jewish and the Palestinian people have national aspirations that require a physical space in which to be realized; the key issue arises from the fact that both know essentially the same land as their homeland. Finally, we deal with *hope* because it is both integral to the aspirations of the two peoples and also a strong factor in the theologies of many Christians who care deeply about Israel. That Christian hope may be (1) for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy in an apocalyptic drama, or (2) for the achievement of the justice and peace by which Israel’s prophets framed the messianic age, or (3) for a workable coexistence that leaves ultimate outcomes to God but assures the well-being of God’s children day by day. In any case, it is a key issue to examine the place of hope in the theological engagement of Christians in the conflict. No less do hopes of various shapes figure in the engagements of Muslims who are not Palestinian but see the outcome of this conflict as crucial to their worldview.

Promise, Land, and Hope – all three are keys in the postures we adopt and the arguments we make. Understanding how they figure in our encounters with one another will help us to gain the insights of dialogue that will deepen our mutual engagement and strengthen our common quest for an end to the conflict. That introduces you in the broadest strokes to the project underway, and I will say more about its particulars before I finish. But first I want to do two other things. I want to discuss some of the approaches to the issues as we encounter them in the American context, and I want to consider how the fairly distinctive American relationship of church and society influences this conversation.

American Theologies

It would be presumptuous of me – perhaps of anyone – to attempt to present comprehensively the picture of American religious groups on any particular issue, and especially on this issue. My comments, then, do not pretend to achieve that standard, for which a substantial book or two would be necessary. My comments will, I hope, represent fairly some of the main lines along which American religious groups array themselves in regard to Israel and the competing nationalisms of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples.

My presentation is intended to draw a profile of the different *kinds* of issues that animate American religious groups around the topic of Israel. That people will differ in their pragmatic assessment of any political circumstance or religious issue is axiomatic. Where the grounds of the dispute are

shared and mutually recognized, the debate can proceed. In the case of Israel in the American religious community, it is the very grounds that are in dispute, and that is what it will be helpful to explore.

The mainline Protestant churches, which have traditionally represented the religious backbone of American society, are famously in decline. Their numbers shrink year by year and their influence on public debate has been sharply curtailed in recent years. Yet they are not absent from the public square on the matter of Israel. But their voice is divided. On the one hand, many in these churches are still working out the kind of Christian realism that Reinhold Niebuhr imbued in several generations of prominent American clergy. Reading the Bible critically, they derive from its human record of divine action a sense of purpose and a template for human life and society. Those then guide their engagement in all manner of social issues. The dignity of the individual, a broad and inclusive sense of justice, and a disposition toward non-violence except in defense of the innocent are key elements in that template. In practical terms, it has engendered a generally positive attitude toward Israel, coupled with a desire to bring the conflict to a conclusion that is mutually respectful of both Jews and Palestinians.

On the other hand, the mainline Protestants in the past three or four decades have come increasingly under the sway of liberation theology, first in the founding voices of Latin American Roman Catholics and subsequently in the voices of women, Blacks, Latinos, gays, and various Third-World communities, including the Palestinians of Sabeel (the Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center) and the Diyar Consortium led by Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb in Bethlehm. The U.S. staff leaders in global mission and policy advocacy most often come from this background, so that the public voice of the churches and the management of the direct denominational ministries in Israel and Palestine are strongly shaped by liberationist perspectives. This stance reads the founding of Israel as a colonialist enterprise of the Western powers and advocates primarily for justice for the displaced and oppressed indigenous Palestinian people.

The division within the mainline denominations is drawn still deeper by the diverse experiences of the church in relation to Arabs and Jews. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans, particularly, carry a heritage of educational, health care, and development work in the Arab Middle East since the 19th century. At the same time, these Protestant denominations have been at the forefront of dialogue programs with the Jewish community in America for generations. Often the church leaders in these respective arenas – the dialogical and the missionary – have limited experience with and awareness of the others’ work, so that it has been easy for the churches to send contradictory messages about the churches’ commitments.

Among the evangelical Protestants, a third foundation for engaging Israel is at work. This is a theological worldview that sets biblical categories and realities at the core. While theologian Gerald McDermott can rightly argue that evangelicals are not the biblical literalists that fundamentalists were, he also goes on in his essay on “Evangelicals and Israel” to demonstrate that the promised land and the Jewish people remain theologically significant for evangelicals because they figure centrally in the Bible’s salvation history. Evangelicals, says McDermott,

take seriously God’s promises in Genesis...to give a land to Abraham’s descendants. They cite Isaiah’s vision for the renewal of Zion, especially in Isaiah 4:2-6, and for the perpetuation of a remnant. They believe that the promise of a kingdom for the new David in Isaiah 9:7 suggests a restored land, and note both Jeremiah’s promise that the Jews would return to the land in chapter 32 and receive a new covenant (chapter 33), and Ezekiel’s recurring theme of the ingathering of all the scattered Israelites in the land. Furthermore, evangelical scholars are impressed by the importance of land in Torah....

(“Evangelicals and Israel,” in *Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations*, Alan Mittleman,

Byron Johnson, and Nancy Isserman, eds. [New York; Toronto; Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books 2007] pp. 142-143)

McDermott cites Elmer Martens when he notes that “the land is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Old Testament...more dominant statistically than the idea of covenant” (*ibid.*, p. 143).

He goes on to say that the same attentiveness to scripture leads many evangelicals also to apply to modern Israel the same standards of justice and compassion that attached to biblical Israel’s tenure in the land. Both in affirming the gift of land and in calling Israel to account for the morality of its life in the land, it is a straightforward, if not quite literal, reading of the biblical witness that informs and motivates the evangelical community.

The Roman Catholic community in America cannot be considered apart from its larger, global context, of course, but ICCJ Vice-President Phil Cunningham has recently offered a state-of-the-question analysis of Catholic land theology as part of the American Catholic-Jewish conversation (“A Catholic Theology of the Land?: The State of the Question,” presented orally at the BCEIA-NCS consultation, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, May 7, 2013; manuscript copy – see a revised version forthcoming in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*).

In his analysis, the Catholic Church is poised between two implications of its landmark Vatican II declaration, *Nostra Aetate*. We are all familiar with the powerful affirmations of *Nostra Aetate* that the Jewish people remains beloved of God and is not to “be presented as repudiated or cursed by God.” In the history of Christian teaching, that presentation included the image of the Wandering Jew, banished by God from the homeland and precluded from returning to it. So the church has removed the onus of Jewish exile from its theological vocabulary. Yet the same chapter of *Nostra Aetate*, in deploring the “hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews,” is careful to say that the church is motivated “by no political considerations.” This implies that the cause of the Jews in founding the State of Israel stands apart from the church’s theological considerations.

Cunningham notes that this is more explicitly underscored in the 1985 “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism,” which asserts that “the existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.” Yet the 1974 “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document, *Nostra Aetate*, §4” says that it is of utmost importance for Catholics to learn to understand “by what essential traits Jews define themselves.” This all leads Cunningham to point to the unresolved methodological tension of “respecting the religious centrality of the Land of Israel for Jews while considering the modern State of Israel only in terms of distinct non-religious international legal norms.” He also points out that Vatican documents close the paths both to a simple, literalist assertion of Jewish land claims and to a supersessionist posture that abrogates God’s promise of land. The task that awaits Catholics, he says, is how to articulate positively a centrist hermeneutic.

In the American Jewish community, a divide has developed largely along generational lines. For those who recall the 1967 and 1973 wars and the existential threat that they posed to Israel, the bond between Israel and the Diaspora is unquestionable. Whether as a threatened homeland or

as the haven for Jews who still face threats elsewhere in the world, Israel is a focal point of support and defense in the face of crisis. For a younger generation that has only known Israel in Lebanon and facing down two Intifadas, building settlements and isolating Gaza, managing an occupation that has stretched on for nearly half a century, the relationship is much more complicated. This is the generation that has invented JStreet, the pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby that wants a more flexible embrace of Israel than the America-Israel Political Action Committee, or AIPAC, is able to offer. This is the generation who in all their philanthropy and commitments want to be aware of and involved with the operating systems that deliver the help they provide. This is the generation to which the Hartman Institute’s iEngage project is directed, striving to lay a new foundation for Israel-Diaspora relations that emphasizes not unending crisis but shared values, not merely supporting Israel but Engaging Israel. As in the Roman Catholic Church, though, the task of articulating the positive hermeneutics of that new foundation is a work in progress.

Finally, I offer as a spokesperson for another American religious group an even younger contributor, the 15-year-old Akash Mehta whose essay on the ethics of interfaith was recently re-published on the *Huffington Post*. Mehta, I would suggest, represents a wide swath of American religious thought, particularly evident among the young people whom I teach. He summed up religion quite succinctly: “A religion is a system of ethics, reinforced and justified by a set of beliefs” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kidspirit/the-ethics-of-the-interfaith-movement_b_3441569.html; retrieved 21 June 2013).

Much to his credit, young Mr. Mehta acknowledged that the ethical quest has yielded many paths and that even those who profess no religion often have an ethical system that guides them. For our purposes, though, it is not the ethics of the atheist that are of note, but rather the priority of ethics over myth, ritual, doctrine, and all else. “A religion is a system of ethics, reinforced and justified by a set of beliefs.” In regard to Israel, one must surmise that, according to this view, any religious claims have to be deconstructed into ethical claims and then evaluated as such. Often in working with my students as well as with the broader sweep of American society, whether religious or not, this is the approach that I hear. There is an inchoate and largely unarticulated ethical sensibility that may be the reduction of whatever religious formation has taken place, or may have been formed quite unsystematically from a congeries of sources and influences. Whatever its sources, that ethical core in turn defines and critiques religious life and belief.

With these several brief profiles I would sketch a range of views that can be found readily in American society, and certainly there are plenty of overlaps that lead to difficult encounters within individual groups as well as between them. Scriptural hermeneutics, readings of history, political assessments and the eschewing of politics, doctrinal guidelines and ethical deconstruction, loyalty and critique and identification and prophetic urgency and solidarity and more give texture to our encounters, but just as often they are also obscured by the white-hot emotions that attach to this issue. Where can one begin?

American Church and State

The question of where to begin is compounded in America by our understanding of the place of religion in society, a question that bears particular interest in the context of this conference on *laïcité*. This is hardly a settled question for us as Americans, as many of you will already be aware. We have already encountered in our workshops and in individual conversations the significant differences that distinguish the *laïcité* of French culture from the separation of church and state in America as well as other forms of secularism. We have no state religion and religious

doctrine plays no formal role in American political discourse. But religion does come into play in our political process.

That is so with regard to Christian attitudes toward Israel not primarily because of the religious character of Israel as a Jewish state – and being a Jewish state involves much more than religion but it does include religion. Rather, it is because of the long-standing American respect for the influence of religion on the individual conscience. Churches for Middle East Peace and JStreet and AIPAC and Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding and Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East and the advocacy offices of the mainline churches and of the Roman Catholic Church all seek to exert influence in the religiously neutral public square. Each works from its own theological foundations and brings its convictions into the political arena to seek out allies and coalitions that can advance its religiously-shaped values. Members of churches and synagogues are urged to vote and to communicate with their Congressional representatives and Senators to urge action on their faith-shaped priorities. There is no religion in our government, but we are still a strongly religious society.

So the doctrinal and biblical and theological and pastoral dimensions of Israel and the Palestinians are very much implicated in the public policy process. And each of the religious communities that would have a voice must also take account of the policy realities already in place – that America is by statute committed to sustaining Israel’s strategic military advantage in the region, that America recognizes Israel as a key ally and maintains a special relationship with Israel, that America has for many years stood in the United Nations Security Council as a staunch defender of Israel and its interests.

Caitlin Carenen, in her book, *The Fervent Embrace* (NY & London: New York University Press 2012), has recently documented the impact of both evangelical and mainline communities on American policy in regard to Israel and the Palestinians. Her study clearly demonstrates that the interests of both the Jewish and the Palestinian communities have been both buttressed and challenged by religious argument at different times. There is no simple equation we could write by which a religious argument equates to a particular position on any of the key issues. In the American context, at least, I can affirm that it will be a significant contribution to find a way to engage in constructive dialogue and debate on promise, land, and hope as people approach them from their respective religious backgrounds. And from the recent experience of the ICCJ in its dialogue with Palestinian Christian theologians involved in the Kairos Palestine process, it appears that a similar benefit can be realized from strengthening the foundation for dialogue outside the American context, as well.

Promise, Land, and Hope – The Project

Very briefly, then, the Promise, Land, and Hope project is a collaborative endeavor of the ICCJ Research Council with three American and two European academic centers. A preliminary meeting in Philadelphia led to the first full meeting of the research team at the University of Leuven in 2012, where the meta-question, or core task, of the project was developed. It seeks to move beyond assessing or describing the various approaches that different religious thinkers and groups take, and certainly does not hope to synthesize a single approach that might serve in all settings. Rather, in the interest of empowering dialogue and affirming diversity, the question is: *What understandings might [we] develop that could serve as resources for constructive dialogue about Israeli-Palestinian issues?*

The appended “[Preliminary Concept Map](#)” sets this as the guiding question at the center of the project, with four interrelated fields of inquiry to be explored over the life of the project, which we anticipate is likely to be five years. Specific land traditions of various communities, theologies that are informed by the experience of Christian-Jewish dialogue, hermeneutics as an inherent

methodological component of any theology, and the particular dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian encounter will all be explored for their contribution to the project. The exact form of the tools to be developed will emerge as the project moves forward, and the next step will be a three-day meeting in Chicago in August, where our primary focus will be deepening our understanding of the land traditions of several communities, particularly in relation to biblical texts.

The project’s goal is to provide tools that will empower dialogue and exchange, with the expectation that greater clarity and understanding will enable people to move forward toward the broad common goal of supporting the Jewish and Palestinian peoples in achieving their respective aspirations, including justice and peace. Our desire is to make it possible for many more people to engage in the kinds of dialogue and encounter that have proven so fruitful in Jewish-Christian relations over a whole range of difficult topics that may even have seemed impossible at one time. As we have in the past found the strength and the trust and the tools to address the person of Jesus, the charge of deicide, *l’enseignement du mépris* (the teaching of contempt), the legacy of oppression, and more, we believe we can also find what we need to be able to address together our deepest hopes and fears that attach to the promised land.

Lecture given at the ICCJ Conference, Aix-en-Provence, Wednesday, July 3, 2013

Rev. Dr. Peter A. Pettit is Associate Professor of Religion Studies and Director of the Institute for Christian Jewish Understanding, Muhlenberg College (Allentown, PA, USA).