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On December 11, 2009, sixteen Palestinian Christians published an appeal in Bethlehem, which was distributed by the World Council of Churches and has since then been discussed, though controversially, as the "Kairos-Palestinian Document."

The following statement from the perspective of the representative for the dialogue between Christians and Jews of the Evangelical Church in Württemberg contains both, an appreciation as well as criticism. The criticism outweighs the affirmative parts.

"The Moment of Truth ..." is not an official church document. The only signatory who is head of a Middle Eastern church, Bishop Munib Younan, has withdrawn his signature. Although the document is headlined as "Word of Faith," it contains primarily a political message and political demands.

On the group"s homepage, www.kairospalestine.ps, the English version of the document is preceded by a brief statement signed by 13 church leaders -- patriarchs, archbishops, bishops, and a custody. This statement carries the title, "We hear the cry of our children," and covers almost nine rows. In it, support is promised for the call to justice, peace and reconciliation and prayer to bless the building of a society that is based on love, trust, justice and peace. ?

The WCC did in the German version not distribute the statement of the church leaders, only the 14-page paper of the first-mentioned authors. The following statement, therefore, deals with this "Kairos-Palestine Document" only, not with the statement of the church leaders.

The Quarrelsome Situation Calls for a Political Solution through Negotiation and Compromise

Clearly perceivable in the document is the complaint about the difficult situation of the Palestinians: their lack of freedom, their material, legal and emotional distress, their loss of prospects, their internal disunity and external dispersal in many countries. On behalf of their countrymen, the authors lament the spread of Israeli settlements in lands claimed by Israel, the unresolved refugee problem, the numerous arrests, the obstacles to the unhindered exercise of religion, the marginalization of Christian Palestinians.

The situation, now as before defined by conflict, calls for a political solution that leads to peace.

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The Protestant churches in Germany have called for a two-state solution and an appropriate settlement between the interests of Israelis and Palestinians, for a solution based on negotiation and compromise (see the EKD studies "Christians and Jews I-III"). In the statement of evangelical (Protestant) Christians in Württemberg, which was supported by the High Consistery of our church, titled "In Support of a Just Peace in the Middle East," published on 11January 2005, we wrote, "We reaffirm the statement of our regional synod of 9 November 1988 which declared, "As a church interconnected with the people of Israel" -- and we add, also with the Christians in Israel and Palestine – "we pray for peace in the Middle East and ask all those, directly or indirectly involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, not to lose the courage for rapprochement and reconciliation. Hostility, mistrust, violence and hatred lead to destruction. Only the persistent effort to achieve understanding, compromise and peace can pave the way to a common future for the peoples of the Middle East.""

These statements have now to be reaffirmed, when it is clear, how difficult, protracted, and endangered the path to peace is in the Middle East and how hard it is for the people affected by the conflict, to keep hope alive.

About some of the Political Assertions in the Document

a) About the tension between non-violence and "legitimate resistance against the occupation"

If the situation is ever to improve, it can happen only under the condition of non-violence. Therefore, the commitment of the authors to non-violent action is to be welcomed and supported. Part of the doctrine of non-violent action is the correlation between means and goals and therefore objection to the view that peace can be achieved through violence. However, the question is, whether a Christian understanding of non-violence will ever become the guiding principle of Muslim-dominated Palestinian politics. This question is exacerbated through the commitment of the writers to "legitimate resistance." For "resistance" meant and still means terror against Jews of both sexes and all ages. The authors have put the concept of terrorism in quotes (4-3), which is probably meant to say that they doubt its legitimacy.

?The claim that if there was no occupation there would also be no resistance (1-4; 4-3), is historically untenable. Larger Arab attacks on Jews happened in Palestine since about 1920, attacks by Fedayeen against Israel since about 1950. The PLO was founded in 1964. The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip took place thereafter, in 1967. It was after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and the complete dismantling of settlements, that the conflict there escalated.

The end of the occupation leads to peace only when it is realized in the course of a comprehensive peace treaty in which both parties are committed to keep their agreements. This is the provision of international law relating to occupation. It can, therefore, not only be a matter of "forcing the oppressor to give up his aggression" (4-2-3). Palestinians themselves can be the major contributors to a situation in which Israelis no longer see them as a threat.

b) Dissolution of the Jewish State instead of a Two-State Solution

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As positive can be taken the prayer for strength for the two peoples in the country to live together and create justice and peace (2-3-1). However, the two-state solution is for the authors out of the question. The phrase for "a [!] new society both for us and for our opponents" (4-3) points to the vision of a single state for both peoples, which would mean the de facto elimination of the State of Israel as a Jewish state. This assumption is confirmed by 9-3, "Trying to make the [!] state a religious state, Jewish or Islamic, suffocates the state, confines it within narrow limits … We appeal to both, religious Jews and religious Muslims: let the state be a state for all its citizens ... "? ?This understanding of the political demands is supported by the "message to the Jews, … We can organize our [!] political life … according to the logic of this love and its power, after ending the occupation and establishing justice" (5-4-2).

All these quotations talk about one state, one society, one common political life, and not once about two states. In such a single state Jews would become a minority, dominated by a Muslim majority, possibly augmented by returning refugees who would have "their right of return, generation after generation" (1-1-6). Everything positive is projected into this vision of the one state, "We will see here "a new land" and "a new human being," capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters." (10) But how credible can such an offer be to Jews if the vanishingly tiny Christian-Arab minority cannot guarantee it for them? Such a state would not be able to meet the protective function which the State of Israel has for the Jews and which is also valued highly by the Protestant churches in Germany. The real problem of the conflict, and also of the document here to be analyzed, lies obviously not in a concentration on the question of the occupation, but in the question of acceptance of the Jewish State of Israel by its Arab neighbors. The existence of the State of Israel is, from the perspective of the Protestant churches in Germany, not disputable.

c) A Nationalistic or Christian Honoring of the Dead?

As positive can also be taken the appeal to Muslims, to renounce fanaticism and extremism (5-4-1). Ineligible, however, is the undifferentiated statement (4-2-5): "We respect and have a high esteem for all those who have given their life for our nation. And we affirm that every citizen must be ready to defend his or her life, freedom and land." There are, indeed, frighteningly many among them, whose death had no other purpose than to murder as many Jews as possible. Instead, one would appreciate a clarifying Christian word about the problem that these suicide bombers are revered as "martyrs."

d) No Appreciation for Palestinian Autonomy

The pointed focus on the occupation leaves the authors seemingly no room to appreciate Palestinian autonomy as a step on the road to the freedom of a state. The current Palestinian

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government under Prime Minister Salam Fayyad began with success, seizing the opportunities of autonomy to build functioning institutions of civil society in the West Bank. One of its first actions was the long overdue creation of the monopoly of power in the government. Administration, judiciary and police were made more effective with foreign assistance. Israel honored such measures with the abolition of many security controls. These measures and the greater freedom allowed the West Bank since 2009 an economic growth of 6-7%. It is startling that this transition, for which Christians too should be grateful, is not reflected in the document.

The Call for a Boycott against Israel

The call for a boycott "of everything produced by the occupation" (4-2-6) respectively against all of Israel (7) is to be rejected for three reasons.

First, Germany has bad experiences with the boycott of Jews.

Secondly, a boycott would entail a one-sided allocation of guilt to Israel. That the reality is as it is, has very much to do also with the political actions of the Palestinians and various Arab states. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Palestinians, even though the weaker part, are not only victims but also responsible agents. To achieve peace, both sides, not just one have to move.

Thirdly, international sanctions would mean that a negotiated solution would be replaced by coercion. No one has the right to terminate an existing state by external compulsion. ? ?The call for a boycott is addressed to "individuals, companies and states" (4-2-6). The whole world should boycott Israel. If the specified aim is, "to free both peoples from extremist positions of the different Israeli [!] governments" (4-2-6), then the only alternative that remains is a Palestinian government, Fatah or Hamas, for both peoples. Is this meant by love, justice and peace?

About some Theological Assertions in the Document

The theological assertions of the paper are divided into the sections faith -- hope -- love. When European churches speak about Judaism and Israel as God"s people, they often begin with a confession of guilt. Not so the Kairos-Palestine Document. It contains very little self-criticism, and if so, it is the political disunity of the Palestinians (3-2, 9-4) that is lamented or their own silence (5-2). When attention is drawn to the prophetic mission of the church (3-4-1), it seems necessary to point out that the prophets of Israel usually were rather self-critical and called their own leadership and their own people to repentance. In paragraph 5-2 Christians in general are called to repentance in the sense of a reversal of their solidarity to solidarity with the suffering Palestinians. In section 6, unspecified Christian "fundamentalist" supporters of Israel are called to "repentance," to turn their solidarity to the Palestinians.

The document relativizes theological statements about God"s special relationship with Israel by saying, Jesus came with "a new teaching" (Mk 1:27) "casting a new light on the Old Testament, on the themes that relate to our Christian faith and our daily lives, themes such as the promises, the election, the people of God and the land"(2-2-2). It focuses on the universal meaning of the word of God (2-2) and "our country" (2-3), not on any specific gifts of grace to Israel. The permanent election of Israel and God"s faithfulness to the covenant, with the promised land as elemental part of the covenants, are for us, however, key statements relating to the center of the Christian faith. God"s special relationship with Israel cannot be relativized and made into a concept that applies universally. The EKD-study "Christians and Jews III" (4.6.5) states, "The demand of Palestinian Christians to universalize all biblical statements about the land, ("to every people God has given a land") contradicts … the biblical insight that God has bound himself inextricably to the Jewish

people. Covenant and land belong together." This criticism also applies to the" Kairos-Palestine Document."? ?The phrase "that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity" (2-5) or "evil" itself (4-2-1), is theologically excessive. Occupations are dealt with in international law, not as a desirable, but also not generally preventable fact, including their termination.

Comparison with Apartheid

By using the term "Kairos Palestine Document" the authors or the World Council of Churches draw a comparison between Israel and the former apartheid government of South Africa. The apartheid accusation is aimed at the self-image of Israel as the Jewish state. Just as apartheid was ended in South Africa, so the authors and the World Council of Churches intend to abolish the Jewish character of Israel. Behind this demand is the equation of Zionism with racism, to which Philip Potter as General Secretary of the WCC objected vehemently on the occasion of the equation"s adoption by the UN in November 1975. He used the following three arguments:

None of the aspirations of the Jewish people justifies this equation; there exists no evidence that Zionism is racist in the spirit of the 1967 UNESCO definition of racism; this equation is distracting from the urgent task of solving the Middle East conflict through peaceful negotiations. Does the WCC today distance itself from these argument?

One has also to be reminiscent of the differentiated reaction of the Evangelical Church in Germany under the presidency of Bishop D. Class to the 1975 UN decision: the study group "Church and Judaism" was commissioned to develop an "Aid to better Understanding." It was published in 1976 under the title "What is Zionism?"

The comparison of Israel with apartheid South Africa is inappropriate. There are anti-Arab sentiments among Israelis, but racial segregation is not part of Israeli policy. Conversely, anti-Semitism among Arabs and Muslims is not only widespread, but often also a political instrument. Anti-Semitism and the transference of hostility against Israel on all Jews is the main reason why the number of Jews in Arab countries fell from around 1.2 million (around 1930) to currently about 5,000. Israel is home to more than 1.2 million Palestinians who are legally equal to other Israelis. However, they complain about discrimination in everyday life (1-2-1). Not in one Arab country Jews are legally equal citizens.

Summary

1. Clearly perceptible is the lament of the "Kairos-Palestinian Document" about the difficult situation of the Palestinians. Along with other Protestant churches in Germany, the Evangelical Church in Württemberg argues the case for the persistent effort for understanding, compromise and peace.?

2. As positive can be highlighted the admonition of the authors to abandon violence, fanaticism and extremism. ?

3. The document calls for the dissolution of the Jewish character of the State of Israel. This demand is accompanied by a theology in which the uniqueness of Israel"s relationship with God is dissolved in a universalistic way.?

4. The demand to abolish the Jewish character of the State of Israel, is legitimized by equating Zionism with racism and apartheid.?

5. The objective here is not the compromise of a two-state solution favored by the "Middle East Quartet" (UN, USA, EU, Russia), but an Arab-Muslim majority society in a single state for Muslims,

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Jews and Christians.?

6. This Muslim majority society should, according to the authors, be governed by the Christian values of love, justice and peace. How this is to be achieved remains unclear.?

7. To achieve their goal, the authors do not ask for a negotiated solution, but call on states, organizations and individuals to apply sanctions, boycotts and coercion against Israel.?

8. The support of Christians and churches for Israel should, according to the authors, be transformed into support for the Palestinians.

?

Conclusions

Many of the assertions of the "Kairos Palestine-document" cannot be brought in line with the theological and political statements of Protestant Churches in Germany about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The paper can, in my view, not be supported.

It seems important, however, to read the document as subjective expression of a very large concernment, with which the targeted churches have to deal. Yet, the churches would be making a serious mistake if they let themselves be exploited to put pressure on Israel. First, they are forbidden to do so because of their own anti-Jewish past from which they have turned away with great effort. Second, ecclesiastical pressure on Israel would be extremely counterproductive. This would be the most certain path to failure of any attempt to persuade Israel to make changes.

In the statement of January 11, 2005 by Protestant Christians in Württemberg, "Promoting a Just Peace in the Middle East," which was supported by the High Consistory, we wrote: "Our partners in dialogue in Israel and Palestine expect of us attentive perception, empathy with their situation and concrete help. ... In view of the complex conflicts, it is important that we stay in conversation with each other and with our partners and that we are stepping up efforts to bring those together in dialogue, who have no contacts with each other. We plead for increased support for individuals and groups that work towards understanding, compromise and peaceful co-existence between Israelis and Palestinians."

In consequence of these sentences, the specific response of our regional church to the "Kairos-Palestinian Document" should consist in encouraging and promoting talks between Palestinian Christians and Jews of different religious persuasions. In section 9-2, the document advocates a better mutual becoming acquainted with each other. Learning to perceive the self-understanding of the dialogue partner is an important step on the path to accommodation. Both sides need to change. Both societies are most likely to change through processes that come from within. The living together of Christians and Jews in Israel and in the areas of Palestinian Autonomy presents itself as the chance to take steps toward each other, to understand each other better and to find allies for such processes.

Bad Boll, June 25, 2010

Signed,

Dr. Michael Volkmann

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* The Rev. Dr. Michael Volkmann is the representative for the dialogue between Christians and Jews for the Evangelical Church in Württemberg since 2003. At the age of 18, he traveled to Israel for the first time, and at age 20, he spent a year in the country as a volunteer with Aktion Sühnezeichen. Subsequently, study of theology, pedagogy and Jewish studies; doctorate in social sciences.

Translation from the German: Fritz Voll

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