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Seeking Understanding to Enable Constructive Dialogue

In October 2011, the ICCJ invited a number of Christians to a meeting in Beit Jala, situated not far from Bethlehem. Two Jewish observers were also invited and contributed to the discussion. I had been asked to present a few reflections on Christian discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The purpose of these musings was to suggest a number of analytical tools that might enable constructive dialogue. My thoughts reflect very much the fact that I work in Jerusalem, and that I constantly meet groups (e.g., students, pilgrims, politicians, journalists, diplomats, etc.). My musings are based on numerous comments I have heard, questions that have been posed to me, and discussions I have had with these visitors.

(I) First, I would like to mention five topics that seem to recur when I meet *Christians who are predisposed to sympathize with Palestinians*:

(a) *“Israel and the Palestinians”*: I find the combination of these two categorizations problematic. This way of describing Israelis and Palestinians tends to describe all Israelis as a monolithic “Israel”, whereas Palestinians, thanks to this classification, are recognized as individuals, who might tend to be in favour of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, another political group or none of them; who might be religious, secular or something in between; who might be militant, pro-peace or simply crestfallen, etc. How often do we hear people say the opposite, i.e., “Palestine and the Israelis”? There are actually no (!) hits on the Internet on “what Palestine does to the Israelis”, but there are some 20,700 hits on the expression “what Israel does to the Palestinians”. The categorization Israel *vis-à-vis* Palestinians is not helpful. The starting-point must be to see the wide variety of opinions among Palestinians as well as among Israelis. A related issue is the phenomenon that the adjective “Jewish” rapidly is becoming a noun: “the Jewish think that ...” This way of expression also adds fuel to the stereotyping of the political and/or religious other. For further reflections on stereotyping and characteristics of cultures, see, e.g., Carne Ross, *Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) and Raymond Cohen, *Negotiating across Cultures: International Communication in an Interdependent World* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2nd ed. 1997).

(b) *“You Jews have settlements—we Christians have the commandment of love!”* Are Israel, Israelis and Jews sometimes defined by their most problematic aspects? E.g., “at the time of Jesus, some of the Pharisees were hypocrites; i.e., all Pharisees were as some Pharisees; i.e.,

all Jews were as [some of] the Pharisees.” Needless to say, the comparison is seldom articulated as bluntly as I suggest in the quotation above, but similar expressions are nevertheless disturbingly frequent and widespread. I often think of Krister Stendahl’s three recommendations for improved interreligious relations, one of which being: “Compare equal to equal”. We should not allow ourselves or other people to define Judaism and/or Israel by settlers and settlements in the West Bank. As a Jew in the audience once said when I gave a talk on this: “a hundred years ago, some thought that we were all bankers; today, all of us are defined as *West Bankers*.” Related to this is the double standard phenomenon, i.e., is more expected from Jews than from other people and peoples? E.g., “... but they have the prophets; they should know better”, as someone once said to me. But why should we expect Jews to be fundamentally different from non-Jews?

(c) “*Why are they doing the same thing?*” When I take groups to Yad Vashem it is distressing to hear this question—or, rather, this accusation—from those leaving an exhibition describing the annihilation of several millions of Jews during the Second World War. Although such a comparison is ridiculous (it is not “the same thing”!), we see a widespread urge to invert the Holocaust, the result of which is that the victims of the *Shoah* are presented as its victimizers. Henrik Bachner, a Swedish scholar who has written extensively on antisemitism, argues that this discourse is a way to ease the sense of collective guilt, as to say: “Yes, it is true that Christendom slandered Judaism for two thousand years and many Christians were bystanders during the Shoah; but now you, i.e., ‘the Jews’ too, are culpable and blameworthy.”

(d) “*This is the mother of all conflicts*”: I am inclined to argue that behind this kind of statements we find a secularized Christian eschatology that still seems to argue that Jews, Judaism—and now, a Jewish state—are what lie between us and a truly utopian society. Needless to say, the conflicts in Congo, Korea and Kashmir have little to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; but even the problems in the Arab world have less to do with Israel than is often argued. As a matter of fact, Slavoj Žižek draws the same conclusion. In a discussion on the lesser and greater *jihad* he writes:

The Palestinians who claim that the liberation of their territory from Israeli occupation will give an impetus to the democratisation of the Arab world have got it wrong. Things are the other way round. One should *start* by openly confronting corrupted clerical and military regimes from Syria to Saudi Arabia which use the Israeli occupation to legitimise themselves. The paradox is that the very focus on Israel is the reason the Arabs are losing the battle. The basic meaning of *jihad* in Islam is not war against the external enemy, but the effort of inner purification. The struggle is against one’s own moral failure and weakness (Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections*, 126).

It might be added that he wrote this before the Arab spring. In Christian imagination and history the Jew has been understood and portrayed as the not yet redeemed human being. I am inclined to argue that the persistent and intense Western yearning to “solve” the Middle East crises can be attributed, at least to some extent, to a secularization of a problematic Christian eschatology.

(e) “*There is no theological space for Judaism post Christum*.” Some Palestinian liberation theologians and their adherents are so eager to delegitimize the State of Israel that they revert to

the kind of Christian supersessionism that we thought we had left behind us. In some sense, one could argue that in current theological discussion the Middle East is the epicentre of Christian supersessionist theology. For this reason, it is imperative to affirm a positive theological relationship to the Jewish people. In other words, relapsing to Christian triumphalistic supersessionism does not enable the much needed constructive dialogue.

(II) Secondly, I would like to mention five issues that often are addressed when I meet ***Christians who are predisposed to sympathize with Jews:***

(a) *To say nothing is to say something.* If Western Christians, involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the West, do not address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are nevertheless drawn into the conflict. The words “antisemitism”, “anti-Judaism”, “Zionism”, “post-Holocaust theology”, etc. are used on a daily basis in Jerusalem—in various ways, and unfortunately at times in twisted ways. For this reason it is always important to define what you mean when using these and other ambiguous terms.

(b) *Are you familiar with the Palestinian narrative?* It has certainly been painful for Christians to realize the extent of Christian anti-Jewish theology. In *Constantine’s Sword* James Carroll needs several hundred pages in order to present this heartbreaking legacy (see *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews. A History* [Boston / New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001], 3-543). Step by step, however, Christians have realized that it is rewarding to integrate into Christian faith Jewish hermeneutics, reflections on theology, theodicy, cosmology and anthropology, aspects of Jewish liturgy, etc. It is time for more Christians to be acquainted with the Palestinian master story, the centrality of *an-Nakba*, and the refugee problem. What will happen when Christians integrate into their theology the master stories of both Jews and Palestinians?

(c) *Are Palestinian Christians the only Christians who are not allowed to use the Imitatio Christi discourse?* For two millennia suffering Christians all over the world have identified with the suffering Christ—Palestinian Christian discourse is not an exception. However, it is unconditionally essential that such an *imitatio Christi* theology does not present all Jews and/or Israelis as Christ-killers, which has been a central motif in the antisemitic discourse throughout the ages.

(d) *“The greatest problem for Palestinian Christians is Islamic extremism.”* I often hear this from Evangelicals who are so pro-Jewish that they seem to ignore the plight of the Palestinians; when visiting Israel and the Palestinian territories they do not even meet with Palestinian Christians, i.e., their sisters and brothers in Christ. There are, of course, tensions between Muslims and Christians; and, yes, there is discrimination and persecution in the Arab world against Christians, but this cannot be taken as a pretext for not seeking ways to end the Israeli occupation. As a matter of fact, I have never met a Palestinian who has disputed the assertion that their greatest problem is the occupation. This is not to say that it is “the mother of all conflicts” (*ut supra*), but, in their daily life, this is their major concern.

(e) *“The one who touches you [plural] touches the apple of God’s eye”* (Zechariah 2.12) and *“you [plural] only have I known”* (Amos 3.2). We must ask ourselves how we, as non-

supersessionist post-*Nostra Aetate* readers of the Bible should deal with this (alleged) partiality of God. After all, this is not an innocent question to pose, especially not for those who on a daily basis suffer from the consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I would argue that part of the answer is to be found in the continuation of Amos 3.2: "... therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." In other words, the concept of partiality cannot be separated from ethics. Chosenness should never be used as a *carte blanche* for immoral behaviour. Furthermore, our discussion of divine partiality must not be separated from Amos' rhetorical question to the Israelites that all are equally under God's care and protection (Amos 9.7).

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Literature:

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