

HOLY LAND, UNHOLY WAR: THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Introduction: Religion and Conflict in Israel/Palestine

The land of Israel/Palestine, however one chooses to call it, is not just the homeland of two peoples locked in conflict over it. It is also considered holy by several monotheistic traditions tracing their origins back to the patriarch Abraham/Ibrahim. This overlay of national identities and religious affiliations creates a potentially explosive mixture, especially when either identity marker becomes ideologized and rendered absolute, inviolable, and essential to one's very existence.

Many commentators have observed that the conflict over Israel/Palestine is not, at its core, a religious conflict comparable to the medieval Crusaders' war against the Muslims. However, religious traditions that sanctify territory and history are invoked to justify nationalistic claims. Religion, with its powerful symbols and loyalties, is fundamental to the identities of both Arabs and Jews, even for those who do not define themselves as traditionally observant. The holy city of Jerusalem, in particular, evokes associations, attachments, and aspirations that are rooted in historical memories and eschatological hopes integral to the self-understandings of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Unlike many liberal Western societies, the Jewish and Palestinian cultures in Israel/Palestine are not conducive to total separation of religion and state governance. Throughout the Middle East, religion is a public concern, not just a private pursuit. There are pluses and minuses to this, as there are in the complementary reality that most Americans, for example, take for granted. Even in Israel, whose culture is more Westernized than Palestinian society or Arab culture generally, the religious dimension is close to the surface. As a self-defined Jewish state, it is a hybrid of secular democratic political norms—the social fruits of modernity—and an ancient covenantal call at Sinai, reiterated by later prophets, commanding the Children of Israel to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy people.” (Exodus 19:5-6) The homecoming of Jews to the land, and now the state, of Israel has created a radically new setting in which they can define who they are, and relate for the first time to Christians and Muslims, out of that recast self-understanding. For their part, the Palestinians are trying to define themselves as a distinct Arab nation under conditions of dispossession, exile, and brokenness. The political turmoil over the last century has created a cycle of violence, retaliation, and ongoing mutual threat. As a result, both national identities have been tragically skewed and defined as mutually exclusive rather than complementary. Spiritual energies that could otherwise be invested in collective healing and renewal are constantly sapped, or misdirected, by the state of war.

The intermingling of religion and power politics corrupts both. Invoking God's name to justify territorial claims that end up harming others perverts what is professed to be sacred. But protracted conflicts have always generated this spiritual contamination, which is exacerbated by politically motivated violence. The exclusivist or triumphalistic tendencies of the different Abrahamic traditions only add fuel to the fire.¹

Judaism, Zionism, and their Impact on the Conflict

As Arthur Hertzberg noted in his landmark anthology of Zionist thinkers and activists, the phenomenon known as Zionism can not be explained by using conventional political categories. Other modern nationalist movements, struggling to overcome home-grown tyranny or colonialist occupation from outside, had an existing land and language as the dual foundation for their political aspirations. The Jewish nation-building project had to reclaim both, mobilizing Jews to return to their ancestral homeland and resurrecting Hebrew as a vernacular language that could unite immigrants from over 100 Diaspora communities.² From the beginning, the Zionist undertaking forged a creative synthesis of 19th-century nationalist ideology with centuries-old messianic hopes to end the Jewish condition of exile by returning to the ancestral and still-promised homeland. Those hopes were based on a profound faith orientation common to Jews everywhere, linking a collective return to the Holy Land with the redemptive transformation of history anticipated at the "End of Days."³ The Hebrew prophets, reflecting on the ultimate purpose of exile within the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people, foresaw an eventual return that would restore the people to the land and to its vocation as a priestly community chosen to bless all of humanity. This messianic vision was enshrined in Jewish prayers recited every day and reaffirmed with special intensity on religious festivals. For close to two thousand years, these liturgical affirmations animated and consoled a dispersed, politically marginalized, and often persecuted people. It is this unbroken chain of covenantal faithfulness that serves as the spiritual underpinning of the political movement called "Zionism," which takes its name from the prophetic and messianic term "Zion," connoting redemption for both land and people.

It should be noted that, even for Ben Gurion and other secularized Jewish nationalists, the Hebrew Bible was the spiritual, historical, and cultural touchstone for Jewish identity and the Jewish people's link to the land of Israel. And throughout the development of Zionist thought and activism, there were visionaries like A. D. Gordon (1856-1922) and Ahad Ha'am (the pen name of Asher Ginsberg, 1856-1927) who envisioned a Jewish national homecoming in very practical terms, encompassing politics and economics, and, at the same time, viewing that political revolution as a means to spiritually redeem a

¹ Cf. Martin Jaffee, "One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 69, No. 4, 2001, pp. 753-776.

² Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, New York: Atheneum, 1984, p.15.

³ Hertzberg notes: "Writers too numerous to mention have characterized the modern [Zionist] movement as 'secular messianism,' to indicate at once what is classical in Zionism—its eschatological purpose; and what is modern—the necessarily contemporary tools of political effort, colonization, and the definition of Jewry as a nation, thereby laying claim to an inalienable right to self-determination." (*Ibid.*, p. 16)

suffering, landless, and powerless people. Their religious symbolism challenged the *realpolitik* pragmatism of Theodore Herzl and many other Zionist leaders; and their “messianic” visions challenged, quite deliberately, the passive pietism of classical rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, their this-worldly notions of redemption, melding ideology and praxis, were inspired by the core values of justice and human dignity championed by the Hebrew prophets.

This combination of traditional values and symbolism with modern political norms stretches conventional categories of “religion.” This complicates the task of identifying a Jewish religious dimension to Zionism, the state of Israel, or the Middle East conflict. The term “secular messianism,” which Hertzberg and others use to define the spiritual essence of the Zionist enterprise, may sound like an oxymoron, or at least a paradox (which, on some level, it is). It reflects the reality that Jewish piety or spirituality is characterized more by practice than by belief. If one sees in the Hebrew Bible the basis of all Jewish existence, then one can not avoid or deny a central feature of the Biblical worldview; namely, that many of the Torah’s injunctions presume a Jewish collective existence in the land of Israel as the locus for a covenantal mission consecrating space (land) and time (calendar). In ancient times, when agriculture and livestock formed the basis of an economy, specific injunctions in the Torah were meant to create an ecologically holistic framework for communal life—for example, the commandments regulating tithing or consecrating first fruits, as well as the sabbatical rhythm allowing the land to lie fallow every seven years.

In the modern era, translating these ancient practices and their spiritual rationale into idioms that make sense, and that can appeal to large numbers of Jews, has been the challenge facing religious Zionists of all ideological hues. In the pre-state period, the preeminent figure in the traditionalist wing of the Zionist movement—a minority outnumbered by the secular, either socialist or nationalist, leaders—was Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935). His mystical, messianic understanding of the national renewal unfolding around him transcended the duality of religion vs. secularity. Rabbi Kook saw the Zionist homecoming as part of a Divine plan for global redemption. He pointedly embraced the socialist, nonobservant pioneers who established the *kibbutzim*, the Zionist labor federations, and other national institutions in pre-state Palestine. His visionary synthesis became a model for many other religious Zionists, including the political activists who transformed the *Mizrahi* movement into the National Religious Party once the state was established.⁴

The watershed for religious Zionism was the Six-Day War in June of 1967. In less than a week, Israel found itself controlling four times the territory it had jurisdiction over during the previous nineteen years. Jews everywhere saw the war as having averted a catastrophic defeat by the armed forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. In the post-war euphoria, a new spirit of national idealism and determination emerged. One of the fruits of that spirit was the impulse to establish Jewish settlements or neighborhoods in the

⁴ Cf. *Abraham Isaac Kook—The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, Ben Zion Bokser trans., New York: Paulist Press, 1978; and Avineri, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-197.

newly occupied territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. There were security-related reasons for holding onto these areas, to create defensive buffers around Israel's main population centers. But there was a "religious" motivation as well, amply supplied by the *Gush Emunim* (Bloc of the Faithful) settlement movement and its charismatic rabbinic leaders.

Chief among those leaders was the son of the pre-state Rabbi Kook, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, who became the spiritual head of *Gush Emunim*. He saw the outcome of the 1967 war as portending the messianic deliverance of the Jewish people, and so he opposed any territorial compromise that would involve ceding any of the conquered lands to Arab sovereignty. He and his disciples (younger rabbis and lay activists including Haim Druckman, Eliezer Waldman, and Hanan Porat) gradually took control of the formerly moderate National Religious Party and created a vast infrastructure of economic and political interests undergirding the settlement movement. If one were to pinpoint a key "religious" element on the Jewish/Israeli side helping to perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and making a viable peace agreement more difficult to achieve, it would be the messianic determinism of *Gush Emunim* and its political heirs, along with the forces in government and society that have emerged to implement their partisan ideology.⁵ As the religious aspect of the conflict has intensified over the years, with the parallel rise of Islamist movements on the Arab side, a heightened militancy has emerged among the Jewish settler population, especially in the younger generation. This development is exemplified by the "hilltop youth" who have established unauthorized outposts in the West Bank.

The other major Orthodox Jewish viewpoint in Israeli politics is the non-Zionist position represented by the parochial *haredi* parties. Although in earlier decades their leaders expressed more dovish views, in recent years they, too, have tended toward right-wing positions favoring Jewish rule over all, or at least most, of the Holy Land. They share the *Gush Emunim* belief that God promised the whole land to the Jews, based on certain Biblical texts and later Rabbinic interpretations. According to this self-referencing and self-preferencing worldview, no Arab territorial claims in Palestine are valid.

Before considering the Islamic dimension of the conflict, mention should be made of a small counter-movement within the ranks of religious Zionism. This group of religious "doves," called *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* (Strength and Peace/Paths of Peace), favors political and territorial compromise to save human lives and to end what is perceived as a long-term, dehumanizing, and corrupting occupation of the Palestinian people by Israel. Members of this movement, who take Biblical and Rabbinic tradition as seriously as do *Gush Emunim* supporters, either cite alternative religious texts or they interpret the same Torah sources differently. The following statement appears on the movement's Web site: "As the only religious Zionist peace organization of its kind, we are in a unique position

⁵ For analyses of *Gush Emunim* and its ideology, see Ian S. Lustick, *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1988; and Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman, trans., Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

to counter fundamentalist and extremist political arguments that have erroneously placed the value of the Land of Israel ahead of human life, justice, and peace—concepts which have always been central to Jewish law and tradition.”⁶ Out of the ranks of *Oz veShalom-Netivot Shalom* came the leaders of the *Meimad* religious Zionist party, which allied itself with Labor for a time and offers an ideological alternative to the right-wing National Religious Party. *Meimad*’s leader and former representative in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) is Rabbi Michael Melchior, the former Chief Rabbi of Norway.

The Role of Islamist Ideologies and Movements

In the pre-1948 period, before the state of Israel was established, the Palestinian leadership under the British Mandate did what it could to thwart the influx of European Jews and what they saw as the gradual takeover of their country by foreigners. Two personalities, legendary figures from a Palestinian perspective, stand out in any historical account of the first half of the twentieth century. The first is ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam, a Syrian-born sheikh who led a militant revolutionary movement in the 1930’s against both the British Mandate and the Zionist movement. A deeply religious man and a fiery preacher, he and his underground fighters (*mujahideen*) waged a violent struggle, or *jihād*, to advance Palestinian Arab and Muslim interests, motivated by their religious convictions. When British troops killed the charismatic sheikh on November 19, 1935, he became a martyr to the Palestinian cause, an idealistic patriot whose fervor and self-sacrifice still inspire Palestinian Muslims today. In fact, the “military wing” of Hamas, the al-Qassam Brigades, bears his name, as do the al-Qassam rockets fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel. The sheikh’s radical politics offered an alternative to the less extreme ideology and tactics of the established, or more recognized, Palestinian leadership of that time, personified by the second key figure: the mufti⁷ of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Muhammad Amin al-Husayni (1895-1974).

Al-Husayni was, and remains, probably the most controversial Palestinian leader of twentieth century. Arab nationalists have idealized him as a patriot waging a war of principled resistance against Zionism, while Israeli Jews have vilified him as a genocidal anti-Semite and fanatic. A sympathetic, but critical, biography of the mufti by Philip Mattar⁸ analyzes his role in Middle East affairs over a long and influential life, during which he managed to antagonize more pragmatic Arab leaders (such as King Abdullah of Jordan in the 1940’s), as well as British authorities and the Zionist leadership. After rising to power at age 24 as head of the Supreme Arab Council under the British

⁶ See www.netivot-shalom.org.il English-language literature from Oz veShlaom-Netivot Shalom can be obtained from P.O.Box 4433, Jerusalem, Israel 91043. See, in particular, the booklets *Religious Zionism: Challenges and Choices and Violence and the Value of Life in Jewish Tradition* (both edited by the present writer, who served as the movement’s director in the 1980s). Cf., also, Uriel Simon, “Territory and Morality from a Religious Zionist Perspective,” in David Burrell and Yehezkel Landau, eds., *Voices from Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land*, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992, pp. 107-117.

⁷ A *mufti* is someone authorized to issue *fatwas*, Islamic legal rulings. In Jewish tradition, the parallel would be *posek*.

⁸ Philip Mattar, *The Mufti of Jerusalem: Al-Hajj al-Husayni and the Palestinian National Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, revised edition, 1988.

Mandate—appointed by High Commissioner Herbert Samuel, himself a Jew and a Zionist—he used his office, with its resources and its network of mosques in Palestine, to mobilize anti-Jewish violence. He also used his contacts in other Muslim countries to encourage international pressure against the Zionist movement.

The British exiled the mufti to Iraq in 1936, in response to the outbreak of the Arab Revolt. He made his way to Berlin and made common cause with Adolf Hitler and other Nazi leaders. He recruited Muslim soldiers in Bosnia and elsewhere for the Axis cause, yet he wrote in his memoirs (published in Damascus in 1999) that the Palestinians were not in favor of exterminating the Jews. Mattar and others claim that his political alliance with the Nazis was forged mainly because the Germans were fighting his two principal enemies, the British and the Zionists, and because Germany had supported the Ottoman Empire in World War I, when al-Husayni was an officer in the Ottoman army.⁹

Placed in their historical context, the lives of al-Qassam and al-Husayni shed light on more recent events. Islamist movements like Hamas (the “Islamic Resistance Movement”) or the more radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad did not emerge in a vacuum, and it is important to realize that throughout the 20th century religion played a profound role in Palestinian politics. Those politics were, in turn, influenced by developments elsewhere in the Middle East, especially the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*). This movement was founded in Egypt in 1928 and has inspired branches in other Arab countries, including Palestine.¹⁰ The Palestinian branch, formally established in the 1940’s, was motivated by two major imperatives that converged in its ideology and activism: (1) to resist the growing strength of Zionism and then Israel, and (2) to further the creation of one pan-Islamic nation using political and military means in a sacred struggle (*jihad*) on behalf of God and Islamic principles. Political historian Khaled Hroub traces the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, its ties to the *Ikhwan* branches in Egypt and Jordan, and its ambivalent relations with the more secular nationalist movement, Fateh. For decades, especially during the time of Egyptian President Nasser’s popularity (and his suppression of the Egyptian Brotherhood), the “Palestinian Brotherhood continued to maintain that mobilization for the war of liberation had to have a proper Islamic foundation. A generation of Muslims committed to their faith and prepared for sacrifice had to be raised by shaping the character of individual members of that generation in a true Islamic mold.” While Fateh and other PLO groups engaged in guerilla warfare against Israel, the Brotherhood opted for a “cultural renaissance designed to instill true Islam in the soul of the individual” before engaging in a collective liberation struggle in concert with the rest of the Islamic *umma* (worldwide community).¹¹ From the late 1960’s through the 1980’s, Palestinian Islamists consolidated their influence through the creation of mosques, student societies, and charitable societies, drawing Muslim youth into their circles.¹² The decline of Nasserism

⁹ Mattar sees al-Husayni as a political opportunist whose main objective was “to stop the Jewish emigration to Palestine that he saw as leading to displacement or eviction of his own people.” (*Ibid.*, p. 107)

¹⁰ According to Khaled Hroub, “the Palestine question was the driving force behind the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood across the region.” Khaled Hroub, *Hamas: Political Thought and Practice*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2000, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

following the debacle of June, 1967, helped attract followers, as the appeal of secular nationalism and leftist ideologies waned and as Israel consolidated its occupation of the territories won in the Six-Day/June War.¹³

The Islamic revolution in Iran, bringing Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979, reverberated throughout the Middle East, as Islamists drew inspiration and hope from this watershed development. Fathi al-Shikaki, Abd al-Aziz Awad, and other radical students broke away from the Brotherhood, considered too moderate, to form Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Even though these militants were Sunni Muslims, they saw the revolutionary theocratic regime in Tehran as a model for an Islamic government in all of historic Palestine. In addition, the Shi'ite focus on martyrdom (emerging from the massacre of Imam Husayn and his companions at Karbala in 680 C.E.¹⁴) has influenced the ideology and tactics of PIJ, which adopted suicide bombing against Israeli civilian targets as a central element of its jihadist struggle. Its uncompromising ideology has kept PIJ outside of any political negotiations, doctrinally committed to armed struggle against Israel.¹⁵

The ideas and policies of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, are more nuanced and variegated than those of PIJ. In his detailed study, relying on documents issued by Hamas over the years, Hroub demonstrates how the movement adjusted its doctrine and tactics in response to events. It was founded in conjunction with the first Intifada, which broke out in December, 1987. The earlier Brotherhood movement, along with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin's existing activist group (founded in 1983), helped to found Hamas, initiating a new phase in the Islamist struggle against Israel. An "Introductory Memorandum" issued by Hamas in 1993, offers a succinct rationale for the movement's existence and includes these statements:

Hamas is a popular struggle movement that seeks to liberate Palestine in its entirety from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan. It bases its ideology and politics on the teachings of Islam and its juridical tradition. It welcomes all those who believe in its ideas and stands and who are ready to bear the consequences of sacred struggle (*jihad*) for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment in it of an independent Islamic state...

Hamas believes that the ongoing conflict between the Arabs and Muslims and the Zionists in Palestine is a fateful civilizational struggle incapable of being brought to an end without eliminating its cause, namely, the Zionist settlement of Palestine...

Believing in the sacredness of Palestine and its Islamic status, Hamas believes it impermissible under any circumstances to concede any part of Palestine or to recognize the legitimacy of the Zionist occupation of it.¹⁶

Hamas bases its position on traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the doctrine of *Dar al-Islam* (or Domain of Islam).¹⁷ According to this view, Jewish national

¹³ The stroke, or slash, here reflects two subjective interpretations of the same event: the "Six-Day War" in Israel and the West, versus the "June War" in Arab collective memory.

¹⁴ Cf. Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, Oxford: One World Publications, 2003; and Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.

¹⁵ Egyptian authorities expelled al-Shikaki and other Islamist radicals following the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981. He was assassinated in Malta in 1995, probably by Israeli intelligence agents.

¹⁶ Hroub, *op.cit.*, pp. 293-4.

sovereignty over any part of Palestine violates God’s will, and a territorial compromise with Israel is therefore prohibited. Hamas (along with other Islamist movements) perceives the Zionist enterprise as part of a general Western campaign against Islam and Muslims, making militant resistance to Zionism a pan-Islamic imperative.

One of the crucial differences between “Islamist” movements and traditional Islamic thought is their attitude toward Jews and Judaism. Muslims are taught by the Qur’an and later sources that Torah Judaism is a revealed religion, since Moses and the other Biblical prophets are also Muslim prophets. This basic teaching leads many Muslims to distinguish between Judaism (seen as legitimate) and Zionism (perceived as an illegitimate corruption of the Torah).¹⁸ Ironically, there are some strictly observant (*haredi*) Jews who make a similar distinction and value judgment¹⁹, and the Palestinian leadership has, on occasion, enlisted these *haredi* Jews to bolster their political claims. One rarely hears Jews making a distinction between “Islamic” and “Islamist,” probably because most Jews do not know enough to distinguish between the two, and media stereotypes tend to paint Muslims in general as inherently anti-Jewish. Part of the challenge in seeking a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine is finding ways to re-humanize the demonized “enemy,” in a spirit of mutual respect and appreciation.

It remains to be seen whether Hamas leaders, or their followers, are capable of sufficient doctrinal flexibility to enter into fruitful negotiations with Israel, aiming for a two-state compromise. Over time, strategic considerations have allowed Hamas representatives to make a distinction between a “historic solution” (ultimate victory) and an “interim solution” (either a temporary armistice, or *hudna*, or a popular referendum to forge a national consensus). Since the ascendancy of Hamas in Palestinian elections, and then its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip following confrontations with Fateh and the Palestinian Authority, Hamas leaders have had more opportunities to demonstrate flexibility and pragmatism. Political empowerment brings responsibility, and revolutionary rhetoric usually gets tempered by realism. In this respect, Hamas faces the same challenge facing fervently partisan religious Zionists: whether to compromise on Divinely revealed principles (considered theoretical “truth,” but not realizable in practice) in favor of benefits that can be realistically achieved—including freedom, dignity,

¹⁷ The classical doctrine anticipates that lands not under Muslim rule, comprising *Dar al-Harb* (the Domain of War), will eventually be subsumed under *Dar al-Islam*. This kind of historical determinism mirrors, in principle, the *Gush Emunim* position on the Jewish side—with one significant difference: its eschatological vision encompasses the entire globe.

¹⁸ Hamas’s “Introductory Memorandum” includes a rare denigration of Judaism in explaining its anti-Zionist position, saying its political stance is based on a “profound understanding of the Zionist enemy, its intellectual background in the Torah and Talmud, the writings of the founders of the Zionist movement, and its attachment to the myths of the promised land, God’s chosen people, and Greater Israel.” (Hroub, *op. cit.*, p. 299) This disparaging connection between traditional Jewish sources and modern Zionism turns the claims of religious Zionists on their heads.

¹⁹ The *Neturei Karta* (Guardians of the City) movement and the Satmar Hasidim oppose political Zionism as a sinful rebellion against God, looking forward to a Messianic Kingdom in place of the State of Israel. While these doctrinaire anti-Zionist Jews hold religious views antithetical to those of *Gush Emunim*, what these two groups share is a fervent, absolutist belief in historical determinism. Cf. Ravitzky, *op. cit.* (fn. 5), pp. 36-9 and *passim*.

sovereign control over territory, material prosperity, and, above all, the saving of human lives sacrificed for an absolutist objective.

Any political resolution to this conflict will require courageous acts by Muslim and Jewish leaders who place life and peace above religiously sanctioned violence. The political compromises they endorse, at the cost of maximum territorial aspirations, will mean renunciation of doctrinal positions that fuel religious extremism. Some of them may risk their lives or their livelihoods in the process, but they will do so to ensure a better future for their children and the generations to come.

The Influence of Palestinian Christians

For Christianity, Israel/Palestine is also a holy land. Places associated with the life and ministry of Jesus—including Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Jordan River, and Jerusalem—have been pilgrimage sites for Christian tourists for centuries. Although the vast majority of Palestinians living in the land today (some 97%) are Sunni Muslims, the spiritual and political influence of Palestinian Christians, linked by faith and history to their fellow Christians abroad, is far more significant than their numbers would suggest. In recent decades prominent Christian Palestinian writers have had considerable influence presenting their people’s experience to a largely Western public. Among them are George Antonius (*The Arab Awakening*, 1938), Edward Said (*The Question of Palestine*, 1979, and other works), and Hanan Ashrawi (*This Side of Peace: A Personal Account*, 1995).

Given their position as a tiny minority living in the midst of two larger religious populations locked in conflict for the last century, the Christians of Israel and Palestine face many challenges. Among them is a basic identity issue: which is paramount, their Christian faith or their Palestinian nationality?²⁰ For most, both elements are essential for defining themselves, and it could be that whichever is more threatened at any particular moment becomes, at that instant, more salient. Since all Palestinians, including those who hold Israeli citizenship, feel the pressures of Israeli rule beyond the 1967 borders (the so-called “Green Line”), the mutual solidarity of Christians and Muslims struggling to forge a self-governing society in the midst of violent conflict and economic hardship usually takes precedence. But there are, at the same time, ongoing tensions between Christians and Muslims within Palestinian society, exacerbated by Islamist aspirations to create an Islamic state in their own image. The Christians of the West Bank—and, even more, the tiny community in Gaza—can feel intimidated to either conform to the Islamists’ agenda or remain silent. Their coreligionists in East Jerusalem are in a special bind of their own, since the seats of the different churches are there, under Israeli rule. Even in Nazareth, within Israel, tensions were evident when Muslims sought to construct a mosque close to the historic Church of the Annunciation.

²⁰ For analyses of this existential dilemma, see Charles M. Sennott, *The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land’s Christians at the Turn of a New Millennium*, New York: PublicAffairs/Perseus Books Group, 2001; and Fr. Peter DuBrul, S.J., “The Crisis of Palestinian Christians,” in Burrell and Landau, eds., *op.cit.*, pp. 118-158.

Palestinian Christians are also caught up in the wider religious battles between various Christian communities abroad. There are two main Christian factions in the West that take opposing stands on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the first group are the evangelical Protestant churches which tend to be pro-Israel/Zionist, seeing modern-day Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecies which also presage (in their interpretation) a Christian eschatological victory in the Second Coming of Christ. For some of these apocalyptic “Christian Zionists,” Islam as a religion is inherently evil and functions, in their religious worldview, as the archetypal anti-Christ. In the second faction are the pro-Palestinian “liberationists,” who tend to see Palestinian Christians and Muslims as oppressed victims of Zionism and Israel, or at least of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory after 1967. Some of them are theological supersessionists, denying a continued Jewish covenant with the God of history that links Jews everywhere with the land of Israel. Others reflect a “liberation theology” that views the conflict dualistically, with the Jews as the oppressors and Palestinian Arabs as the oppressed.²¹ Yet others hold theological views that emphasize social justice, and they see the indignities suffered by Palestinians as a profound matter of faith and conscience, but without embracing anti-Judaism. Given this range of Christian attitudes outside Israel/Palestine, Palestinian Christians appeal to their coreligionists abroad to take them seriously and to offer them support.²²

A recent public statement issued by an ecumenical group of sixteen Palestinian Christians has prompted considerable controversy, especially among Jewish groups in the United States. Called *The Kairos Palestine Document*, modeled on a similar statement from churches in South Africa during the apartheid era, it was released in Bethlehem on December 14, 2009.²³ The authors seek to bear witness to an inclusive love that does not discriminate or favor either side in the conflict over the Holy Land. Yet their Palestinian loyalties, deepened by the prolonged anguish of their communities, make that kind of nonpartisan love virtually impossible to share with Jews and Muslims, who are in need of such a faithful Christian witness. “The mission of the Church is prophetic,” they assert, “to speak the Word of God courageously, honestly and lovingly in the local context and in the midst of daily events. If she does take sides, it is with the oppressed,” and that means, for them, their fellow Palestinians. But by taking sides, their courage is minimized, and the honesty and love they profess become self-referencing.

²¹ For a “liberation theology” relevant to Israel/Palestine that is based on Genesis and the reconciliation of estranged siblings, rather than on an Exodus paradigm of oppressors and oppressed, see Arthur I. Waskow, *Godwrestling, Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths*, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998; and Yehezkel Landau, “Blessing Both Jew and Palestinian: A Religious Zionist Perspective,” *The Christian Century*, December 20-27, 1989.

²² Among the books in English by Palestinian Christian religious leaders are: Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Ruth C. L. Gritsch, trans., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995; Elias Chacour (with Mary E. Jensen), *We Belong to the Land*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990; Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989; Munib Younan, *Witnessing for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003; Riah Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between*, London: SPCK, 1999; and Jean Zaru, *Occupied with Violence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

²³ Accessible at www.voltairenet.org/article163282.html

While the document's signatories affirm that "our presence in this land, as Christian and Muslim Palestinians, is not accidental but deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land," they do not affirm any Jewish connection to the land, historically or spiritually, and so they never call for a two-state arrangement that would allow both peoples to exercise the right of return and self-determination. Moreover, they do not offer any acknowledgement that Muslim or Christian Palestinians might share responsibility for holding both peoples hostage to continued violence and suffering. Their calls for repentance are directed to two different Christian constituencies. The first call is to their own Palestinian community for "our silence, indifference, [and] lack of communion," weakening the Christian witness by remaining internally divided or putting institutional interests before solidarity with other Palestinians who have suffered. There is no suggestion that Jews deserve empathy for *their* suffering, and there is no direct criticism of violence perpetrated against innocent Israelis. The second call to repentance is to other (mostly Western) Christians who use the Bible to favor Jewish claims, while ignoring or rejecting the justice claims of Palestinians. By omitting any reference to the long history of Christian anti-Judaism or to Christian animosity towards Muslims from the time of the Crusades, and by holding only Israel and its Western sponsors responsible for their suffering, the authors of the *Kairos Palestine Document* have missed an opportunity to speak effectively to the hearts and consciences of their non-Christian neighbors. Even though parts of the document are explicitly directed to Jews and Muslims, these faith communities are likely to retain their own self-referencing positions, with suspicions regarding Christian statements about love. This missed opportunity is very unfortunate, given that most Israeli rabbis and Palestinian Muslim clerics are paid by governmental authorities, making the Christian religious leaders freer to speak their minds, hearts, and consciences than their counterparts in the other two Abrahamic communities.²⁴

The Challenge of Interreligious Peacebuilding

At the outset of this essay, it was acknowledged that, even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not essentially a religious war, nonetheless *religious traditions that sanctify territory and history are invoked to justify nationalistic claims, and they are fundamental to the identities of both Arabs and Jews*. Given this assessment, it follows that the identities and loyalties underlying the conflict might be transformed in the direction of peaceful coexistence by unconventional, or counter-cultural, religious teachings, rituals, and other spiritually resonant actions grounded in one or more of the Abrahamic faiths.

One illustrative example is a campaign by The Bereaved Families Forum, a coalition of Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost loved ones in the course of the conflict. The group organized a display of coffins, hundreds of them, covered with Israeli and

²⁴ I recall a conversation with a Palestinian Catholic priest, who told me how he practices "pre-emptive forgiveness" whenever he is about to confront an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint or a security officer at one of the bridge crossings to Jordan. Sometimes that inordinate generosity of heart succeeds in transforming a potentially humiliating situation into a mutually humanizing encounter.

Palestinian flags. They represented the number of casualties incurred until then during the second Intifada. Along with the rows of coffins was a banner with the organization's slogan: "Better the pains of peace than the agonies of war." Since Judaism and Islam both teach that saving one human life is tantamount to saving the entire world, this powerful symbolic act—repeated in various places, including the UN Plaza in New York—affected people deeply. Another spiritually resonant act was a peace demonstration held several years ago by a group of Israeli Jewish women. They called on their fellow Israelis to relinquish sovereignty over the West Bank ("Judea and Samaria" to religious Jews) for the sake of peace. Among the holy sites in that territory are the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron/Al-Khalil, Joseph's Tomb in Shechem/Nablus and Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem. The women held aloft a huge sign with this message: "Better to Cry Over the Graves of our Ancestors from Afar than to Cry over the Graves of Our Children Up Close."

In addition to public demonstrations by religious peace activists, there is evidence that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clergy have been instrumental in lessening the level of violence in Israel/Palestine, or at least preventing an escalation of the fighting.²⁵ On occasion they have been proactive in forging fruitful contacts between representatives of the two sides. The historic Alexandria Summit in January of 2002, for example, was an attempt by high-ranking clerics of all three Abrahamic faiths to find common spiritual and ethical ground in the midst of the second Intifada. Courageous personalities like Rabbi Menahem Froman, from the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, and Sheikh Talal el-Sider, a former Hamas leader, have met to discuss elements of a peace agreement based on Jewish-Muslim reconciliation. In addition, many grass-roots interfaith dialogues and social action projects are facilitated by faithful activists in both Israel and Palestine.²⁶

If politicians and diplomats would include clergy and grass-roots educators in negotiations; if professional training of diplomats included sensitivity to religious factors in intercommunal conflicts; if the media gave religious peacemakers greater coverage and legitimacy; and if philanthropic agencies would support their efforts, then the religious dimension of Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding would command serious attention, vying with the religious extremists in newsworthiness.²⁷

Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin is a leading theorist and practitioner of religious peacemaking. Referring to Israelis and Palestinians who are living out their faith convictions by building bridges between their embattled communities, Gopin writes:

²⁵ See Yehezkel Landau, *Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, *Peaceworks* monographs No. 51, September 2003, accessible at www.usip.org/files/resources/pwks51.pdf

²⁶ For the text of the Alexandria Declaration and reports on grass-roots interfaith meetings and activities, see Landau, *ibid.*

²⁷ A few years ago CNN broadcast a nine-hour documentary, "God's Warriors," with Christiane Amanpour reporting on Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious extremists. If a major network would devote even one hour to stories of religious peacemakers in different conflict areas, that would give these unsung heroes greater visibility and credibility. An anthology of such case studies is David Little, ed., *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Many do have followings in the West who sustain them with modest support, but they plainly would be far more effective if policymaking circles and political leaders had seen them from the beginning as assets to the peace process. In fact, they have sustained vital relations at times when everyone else has given up. Furthermore, their visibility from time to time on the streets of Israel, in the public square, has been among the few signs of hope that many Jews and Arabs ever see. I have personally witnessed how meaningful that has been for otherwise hopeless citizens on both sides of the conflict.²⁸

I share Gopin's assessment that religious peacemakers have the unique potential to break through conditioned reflexes and resistances that are reinforced by conventional religious thinking. They can share stories of spiritual transformation stimulated by encounters with neighbors, colleagues, and even strangers of a different faith. Those stories can, in turn, help transform others, creating a chain reaction rooted in the Spirit.²⁹

At the level of communal leadership, a different understanding of the sacred has to be taught by clerics and educators. They need to exemplify a "hierarchy of holiness" that places the sanctity of human lives above holy land and holy places. This is especially true in addressing the sensitive issues concerning Jerusalem, above all the area Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the *Haram ash-Shareef*. In a more conducive context of trust and good will, it might be possible for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to design a political framework for peaceful coexistence in a shared Jerusalem. With the holy city serving as a dual capital of Israel and Palestine, both nations could agree to offer up to God the sacred plateau at its heart, deeming it extra-territorial space in terms of sovereignty and with the *waqf* Islamic trust continuing to administer the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock. This was proposed by the late King Hussein of Jordan, and others have endorsed his idea. But in the meantime, voices are heard in both national communities delegitimizing the other's attachments to this sacred site. Such mutual denial adds poison to an already lethal atmosphere.

Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druse, and others in the Holy Land are hungry for an experience of true holiness, rooted in an awareness of the all-loving and inclusively just God. That God has created individuals and nations with such striking differences in order to create a variegated human community that can celebrate diversity instead of feeling threatened by it. (Cf. Qur'an 49:13). If both Jews and Palestinians could affirm that the land belongs to God alone, and that by the grace of God both peoples belong to the land (cf. Exodus 19:5-6), then they could build a life-affirming political framework

²⁸ Quoted by David Smock, Director of the U.S. Institute of Peace's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, in Landau, *Healing the Holy Land*, *op. cit.*, p. 8. Gopin's seminal writings in this field include *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, and *To Make the Earth Whole: The Art of Citizen Diplomacy in an Age of Religious Militancy*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

²⁹ One initiative demonstrating this transformative power is the Open House Center for Coexistence and Reconciliation in Ramle, Israel. Its unique story of two families—one Israeli and one Palestinian—and their shared home in Ramle, is reverberating around the world through Sandy Tolan's book *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East*, New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007. See www.friendsofopenhouse.org

on this spiritual foundation.³⁰ All the children of Abraham can be partners in the task of collective consecration, rather than rivals competing for Divine favor on the basis of a scarcity principle. With regard to truth and holiness, the principle of abundance, of gracious generosity, has to take over. And for this to happen, religious educators must learn from one another, pray for one another, and work together to support the political agenda of reconciliation. Without a shared commitment to genuine sacrifice—humility and renunciation for the sake of God—all the peace plans advanced by diplomats will fail. God’s Holy Land is meant to be a laboratory for practicing justice and compassion towards all. If we rise to that challenge, we will all be blessed by the holiness of *Shalom*, *Salaam*, Peace.

³⁰ For a kabbalistic approach to healing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, see Yehezkel Landau, “The Land of Israel in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations,” in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, article 17, CP1-12, 2008, accessible at <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol3>