

## ‘End the Occupation!’ Say Palestinian Christian Bishops

by Edward Spannaus

At an extraordinary gathering in Washington—which presented a dramatic counterpoint to the ravings of the Christian Zionists which dominate the Bush Administration—four of the leading Christian Bishops in Jerusalem forcefully and repeatedly raised the demand for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and for justice for all Palestinians—Muslims and Christians alike. Also set forth, was the demand that the United States stop using its veto in the UN Security Council, particularly in regard to the World Court ruling on the illegality of the Separation Wall now being built by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon.

One of the Bishops noted that the Palestinian Christian leaders are often criticized for speaking out against the Israeli occupation and against injustice, instead of just sticking to preaching the Gospel. “I am a Palestinian,” Bishop Munib Younan declared. “My people and I are experiencing injustice and military occupation, as well as the accompanying problems of hunger, illness, loneliness, imprisonment and being treated as strangers and intruders in our own land!”

But despite the oppression and indignities which they, along with all Palestinians suffer daily, they are also an optimistic group, seeing themselves as the peacemakers, and uniquely as a bridge for reconciliation in the Middle East.

The four Bishops, who were in Washington to participate in the Sixth Annual Conference of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) on Oct. 22-23, are: His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem; Rt. Rev. Riah Abu El-Assal, Bishop of the Episcopal Church; Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; and Archimandrite Innokentios Exarchos, representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem.

### A Holy Land Without Christians

Under the Israeli occupation, Palestinian Christians have gone from being 20% of the population in the West Bank and Gaza, to about one and one-half percent today. The fundamental cause for the emigration of the Palestinian Christians, is the same as for Palestinian Muslims: the Israeli occupation, and the desperate conditions of life which the occupation has engendered.

As the Episcopal Bishop, Riah Abu El-Assal, put it during the conference: There was no problem under Arab rule, during which the Christian population remained stable, but, he pointed out, the driving out of Christian Palestinians began with the land seizures of 1948, and accelerated after the seizure of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Bishop Younan reported that, at the current rate of emigration, in 15 years there will be no Christians in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ. “What is the Holy Land, without Palestinian Christians?” he asked.

Bishop Younan also explained that the Christians are emigrating because of the hopeless situation in which they are living under the occupation. “They would like a better life, but they can’t: the Wall is preventing them, the checkpoints are preventing them, the indignities are preventing them. This is inhuman.” He noted that unemployment among Palestinians under the military occupation is 70%, and that 65% of the Palestinian population is living below the poverty line, which the World Bank calculates at \$2.00 a day.

The Rev. Innokentios Exarchos, of the Greek Orthodox Church, also stressed the urgency of addressing the problem of unemployment, which, he noted, runs 80-90% in some areas.

In response to a question about the situation in Bethlehem,



*The Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation opened with a press conference in Washington, D.C. on Oct. 22. Left to right: Father Emil Salayta (representing the Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah), Archimandrite Immokentios Exarchos, Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal, and Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan.*

Bishop El-Assal reported that the last real Christmas in Bethlehem was at the Millennium, i.e., in 2000. Today, he said, “Bethlehem is dark; there are checkpoints to get in and out, electricity poles have been destroyed by tanks. . . . There is hardly anything for life in that city.” Last year, he said, was the first time he could get close to the Church of the Nativity with his car; usually you have to park a mile away. “There were no lights, no people. . . .” El-Assal blamed not only the Israelis for this, but also “the indifference of Christians in the West.”

### **‘It Is a Calling for Us To Be Here’**

Bishop El-Assal elaborated this, at another point, saying that “it’s not just the Israeli occupation, the Israeli Army’s destruction of 400 towns and villages from 1948 to 1950,” but that the problem is also this: “Many Christians in the West aligned themselves with the others, not with us, as if we are not equal brothers and sisters in Christ. We were left to die on the side of the road. Here in Washington, and certainly in the ‘Bible Belt,’ Christian Zionism seems to be controlling quite a bit of the minds of many in the Administration. That’s why we have been neglected, that’s why we have been ignored, that is why we have been left to die. We can’t be left without a homeland. Imagine if Israel were left without a homeland, without aid from the United States. That’s what’s going to happen to our people, the Christians. Is it because we are Arab Palestinians?”

Father Emil Salayta, a Jordanian-born Roman Catholic and a founder of the HCEF, picked up on this theme, saying: “We are not talking about small groups of Christians in the Holy Land. We’re talking about one Christian family, preserving a symbol of the continuity of faith of 2000 years, and survival of the Mother Church.”

Father Emil said that Palestinian Christians often ask: “Why should we stay here, in the land of Jesus, and pay a high price—forgotten, and isolated, and misunderstood, and sometimes rejected—without being helped or assisted by the global church, the universal church, and by brothers and sisters in faith worldwide?”

“We believe that it’s our calling to be Christian in the land of Jesus, in the midst of two different religions, and two different cultures—Islam and Judaism. We believe that, although we are a suffering church, we are still the Church of Golgotha, the Church of the Via Dolorosa . . . the Mother Church of the Holy Sepulchre. . . .

“We believe it is a calling for us to be here. We are suffering, we are crucified every day as Palestinian Christians, as part of our whole nation, but we are waiting for the day of liberation, we are waiting for the day of the Resurrection.”

Father Emil said that, as Palestinian Christians, “we hope to play a major peacemaking role and reconciliation, since we have a common ground with both sides,” explaining: “We have our Bible as the common ground with Judaism; and we have our roots, our culture, our language, and our destiny, with our brothers and sisters the Palestinians, since we are Arabs.”

### **The Scourge of Christian Zionism**

Palestinian Christians—who trace themselves to the first Pentecost—are truly the “forgotten faithful.” Ignored by the American press, most American Christians probably don’t even know they exist. But the ignorance or the indifference of Western Christians is only part of the problem; far more outrageous, is that the many so-called Evangelical Christians in the U.S.—better described as Christian Zionists—support the efforts of Israeli fanatics to expel the Palestinians from

their homeland, basing themselves on the theologically-fraudulent claim that God gave the all the land to the Jews, and that expelling the Palestian Arabs, and rebuilding the Third Temple, will hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

The treacherous role of the Christian Zionists, exacerbated by their grip over the Bush Administration, was a recurring theme of the conference. Bishop El-Assal noted how the Christian Zionists raised millions of dollars for Israel and for the settlers, and he particularly singled out the Televangelist Pat Robertson, who came to Israel for the Festival of the Tabernacle, with 4,000 people. "They embarrassed us local Christians, as they do everytime," El-Assal said. "He challenged the Israelis; 'God gave this land to you, don't give back an inch of land to those wretched Arabs.' "

Bishop Younan denounced Christian Zionism as heresy and as a "sick ideology," in his address to the conference. (See *Interview*.)

"In some Christian churches," he said, "the whole Bible, or the Old Testament, is used in an eschatological way, using the Apocalyptic books, to justify the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, and the building of the Third Temple, as a way of hastening the Second Coming of Jesus, and the Armageddon War. . . . These sick ideologies—not theology—grounded not in grace, but in fear, masquerade as Christianity. The Catholic Bishops in Illinois called this ideology a 'false teaching.' I call it heresy. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a pri-

marily political problem, not a religious one. Religion should be used positively, for a solution, and not to inflame the situation further.

## A New U.S. President?

Although President Bush meets frequently with leaders of the Religious Right in the U.S., he has refused to meet with Palestinian Christian leaders, and in fact he does not even meet with the heads of the so-called "mainstream" churches in the U.S. *EIR* asked about this at the press conference. Bishop El-Assal said that they had attempted to meet with both President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair; they were eventually able to meet with Blair, but "there was no real reaching the President," and they never had a meeting with Bush, "for reasons we've not been told."

Bishop Younan said that after the upcoming U.S. elections, "a new President will hear from us, what we really think." He urged American Christians to take the responsibility, to see that such a meeting takes place. "To meet us is not a luxury," he continued, "it's really to speak about the needs of Palestinian and Arab Christians, and the Palestinian people, at this time."

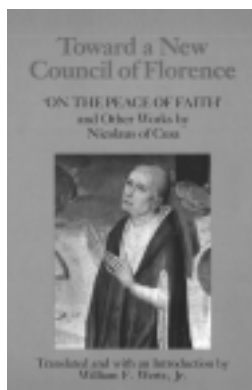
Although Sen. John Kerry has not distinguished himself with regard to the Middle East conflict, there was still hope among many conference participants, that Kerry might bring a fresh approach to dealing with the region, if for no other reason, than that he is not in the thrall of Christian Zionists and the Religious Right in the United States.

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## Interview: Patriarch Michel Sabbah

## The Christian's Role Is Reconciliation

*His Beatitude Michel Sabbah was born in Jerusalem, and has been the Patriarch of Jerusalem since 1987; he is the Bishop of the Roman Catholics in the Middle East, that is, those who follow the Western liturgy. H.B. Sabbah was interviewed by Edward Spannaus during the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington, on Oct. 23.*

**EIR:** You mentioned that the Holy Places should be a place to pray, and for conversion, not to make war. Are you referring to the fact that some of the Christian Zionists, when they come to the Middle East, have a different purpose?

**Sabbah:** The reference is to what is going on in the Holy Land. Both the Israelis and Palestinians are making war because of their holy places. Everyone wants their holy places.



*His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem, visits Jenin, on the West Bank. The war against Iraq, he said, "opened the gates of hell, and who knows who will be able to close these gates now."*

... Jesus Christ did not call on anyone to make war.

**EIR:** What about the people such as Pat Robertson, or some of the so-called Evangelicals from the United States?

**Sabbah:** To these people I say, you have to be Christians. You go back to your main basic commandment: Love your neighbor, love your enemy. It is good to love the Jews, very good. It is also good, very good, to love the Palestinians, so your role is not to make one stronger than the other, that means to make one more able to make war against the other. Your role is to bring both to reconciliation—to make them equally loving each other. This is the role of a Christian. . . .

**EIR:** How do you see the relationship between what is going on in Iraq, the occupation there, and the occupation in the Palestinian territories? Do you see a connection?

**Sabbah:** Of course. The war of Iraq was meant to demolish a potential enemy to Israel. . . . Iraq was the only country that could present a real threat against Israel, and therefore it had to be demolished. And therefore it was not done for the benefit of the Iraqi people, to free them from their dictator, because after the war they put the Iraqi people between hands harder than the hands of Saddam, conditions harder than those from which they suffered under Saddam. So they opened the gates of hell in Iraq, and who knows who will be able to close these gates now.

**EIR:** Do you think the threats now being made toward Iran are of the same order, the same thing?

**Sabbah:** The same thing. Because again, it is a force, a potential force, which is not going in the line of the United States, and the Israel situation. And so that's it. It is an effort to reduce all these forces, to put them get in line; if you're

in line, you can get all the weapons you want, or the money you want. If you are not in line, you are not allowed to have any arms.

**EIR:** Do you think the United States invasion of Iraq has made the situation worse for the Palestinians?

**Sabbah:** Much worse, for both the Iraq people and the Palestinians. . . . It was more and more perceived, that the fight and the question in Palestine was only a question of fighting terrorism, not of a people who asked for its freedom. So fighting terrorism, means you can do whatever you want.

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## Interview: Bishop Munib A. Younan

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# Palestinian Christians Can Serve as a Bridge

*The Right Reverend Munib A. Younan was born in Jerusalem, and has been the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem since 1998. Bishop Younan was interviewed by Edward Spannaus during the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington, on Oct. 23.*



**EIR:** You mentioned yesterday the sharing of water as a necessity, which is something which our organization has been very active in.

**Younan:** Well, I think that the war in the Middle East in the future will not be a war over land, because we already know what the solution is—the two-state solution—I mean every state is now established in the Middle East. But I think the water resources are really the problem now in the Middle East. We noticed now there are tensions, maybe between Turkey and other neighboring countries, on the water issue. And once you really make a two-state solution, you cannot give one state more resources than the other. You cannot give one state more water resources; otherwise they will flourish [and the other will not]. This country is not so much blessed with water as the United States of America, or other parts of the world. So this is the reason we insist also that in any political solution, there must be a political solution for sharing water resources, among the two states—the Palestinian state and the Israeli state.

**EIR:** Yesterday you spoke of the significance of the Palestinian Christians, and of the importance of their existence, and

remaining there. . . .

**Younan:** If we read about the Muslim writers' analysis right now, in the Arab world, the Arab political analysts, they see that the Middle East needs the Arab Christians, because they are the guarantor of democracy and civil society in the Middle East.

I think you know, at the same time, the Archbishop of Madrid, in Spain, after the March 11 explosion, said in a challenging way, that we have to learn from Arab Christianity, how to live with Islam. And I believe that this is very important, that our living for 1,400 years with Islam, has taught us how to have constructive dialogue with them, or even on conflicting issues, but even at the same time, how to live together as one nation.

What I am really thinking is that we as Palestinian Christians and Arab Christians in the Arab world can be a bridge between East and West, North and South, on these issues. We are asking the world to please use us, because understanding Islam is not easy. And you cannot really put all the eggs of Islam in one basket, as you cannot put all the eggs of Christianity in one basket. We are a multifaceted Christianity, and Islam is multifaceted, like Judaism is multifaceted, you see.

We have to teach the world how to live with Islam, and even with Judaism, because we have good experience in how to live with both religions, and we have the three religions, and as Palestinian Christians, to encourage, to find common values—for justice, or peace, or reconciliation, or family, for tolerance, for moderation, for environment, for ecological awareness, whatever it is. I think, in the Middle East, we can really raise these problems, because we want to teach the world that anti-Semitism is racism and cannot work. Islamophobia is racism, and it cannot work. Xenophobia is racism, it cannot work. Arabophobia is racism, it cannot work. Americanophobia is also racism, and we have to get out of these racist feelings which are sometimes existing, because of stigmatization or demonization of the other.

And we have to see God in the other, and accept the otherness of that person.

Then we can have mutual recognition of our human, civil, political, racial, and religious rights. Only then can we really change our globe to be more human, and we Palestinian Christians, and Arab Christians, we are always the initiators of dialogue, with all. And we are ready to teach Europe and the United States of America how to live with others, who are different.

**EIR:** How are your relations with the Palestinian National Authority?

**Younan:** Our relations are good with all the governments in the area. Of course, we are in dialogue on various issues, and the constitution issue and civil society, on other things. Of course, we don't intervene in politics, but we always intervene when there are issues pertaining to human rights.

But Christians, I would say, are living well under the

Palestinian Authority; we don't have any kind of persecution, as some people are trying to say. Because what is persecution? Persecution is forbidding you to preach, or to go to church whenever you wish, and that doesn't exist. Because I preach, nobody censors me, my pastors preach, and so on.

So we really have to be careful in using the word persecution, because when you use that word, you are really driving us to a dark area which is not acceptable. We are not persecuted.

**EIR:** You must have heard some of the statements made by Christian Zionist groups here, who say that the Christians *are* persecuted by the Muslims.

**Younan:** Don't use Palestinian Christianity and Arab Christianity as a political means for a political agenda. If you use us as a political agenda, that is wrong. You have to see that we are an integral part of Palestinian Arab society, and as such we are accepted.

**EIR:** You were interviewed by a Danish newspaper, on Christian Zionism, and declared that to be heresy.

**Younan:** It is not only me. Also the Catholic Bishops in Illinois, in June 2003, said they [the Christian Zionists] are false prophets. Why? Because they are really promoting the destruction of the Dome of the Rock, of the Muslims, building the Third Temple, which is against even the Jewish understanding—the Jews understand the Third Temple comes with the Messiah. And thirdly, by this they think they are hastening the Second Coming, and then they come to the Armageddon War.

The Armageddon War means that Christ will be the warrior, the Christ of this world, not the Christ of the cross. We believe in Christ of the cross, and as such, I believe it is a heresy, because my Lord, my Christ, is always Christ of the cross, who is a servant for all human beings. He is never a Christ of war, he is never a Christ of bloodshed, he is never a Christ of scenarios. He has come to save all the world equally, not only Christians, everybody.

For this reason, from that perspective, I look at them as a heresy, because they are not reading well the New Testament, where Jesus so loved the world that he wanted to save everyone, and at the same time Jesus has never been coercive. *Jesus has never been coercive*. If somebody does believe, he says, just leave it where you are.

But they are bringing in things which are strange to Christianity, and if we don't speak up, if you American Christians don't speak up about these Christian rights, you are leading the nation into difficult things, because they are influencing many naive people. For this reason we have to speak up, and very clearly, without any fear.

**EIR:** If you had one message for the President Bush, what would you say?

**Younan:** I would tell him to be an honest broker, and look for justice in one standard, and not in two standards.

## Christians Under Israeli Occupation

*The Right Reverend Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal was born in Nazareth, and has been the Bishop of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, Diocese of Jerusalem, since 1997. Bishop El-Assal was interviewed by Edward Spannaus during the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington, on Oct. 23.*



**EIR:** Bishop El-Assal, can you describe the relations between the Christians and the Muslims in Palestine?

**El-Assal:** In my opinion the relationship between the Muslims and Christians has been a cordial one. We have lived side by side for 1,400 years. There were some individual cases of clashes. It is unfortunate that we have suffered at the hands of perhaps non-Arab Muslims, as well as when the Crusades came to Jerusalem, we had it bad. Whereas, under or with the Muslims of the Arab nation, we have always had a very good and cordial relationship. . . .

**EIR:** Why are so many Palestinian Christians now leaving the area?

**El-Assal:** Palestinian Christians left the country—we made up about 23% of the population some 60 years ago—as a result of the ongoing conflict. First, many of them were either encouraged to leave, or expelled, with the rest of the refugees who are in the majority Muslims, in 1948. Second, those who fell under Israeli rule were discriminated against in different ways, by different means. The question of land expropriation caused many to lose hope. The fact that many wanted to pursue higher education, but did not succeed, either because of the expense, or because they were not admitted to a certain field of study, so they sought to study abroad, and studying abroad caused some of them not to come back. Others left the country seeking better opportunities for work, knowing that they were, in Israel, last hired and first fired.

And the fact that many of the Christians who came over the years, did not relate to Arab Palestinian Christians. They have seen us as guardians of the Holy Places, rather than as a community, caring that there are so many alive in our liturgies, and our worship, and our schools and our hospitals. And

so, many got fed up. We are not guardians of Holy Places, so we had better leave the country, [some people decided].

One other factor, the fact that some Arab Palestinian Christians thought that they belonged to the West, not the East, and this came with the rise of the missionary enterprise. See how they name us, as Christians: You will hear of the Greek Orthodox, and what comes to mind is Greece. Then you have the Roman Catholic, and what comes to mind is Rome. We, the Anglicans: What comes to mind is the Church of England. They made us even think we were English, or English-like. The Southern Baptists—the Southern Baptist school in Nazareth—exported hundreds of students to the United States, and those hundreds did not come back. Therefore, they belong to Atlanta, Georgia; they don't belong to Nazareth.

Equally true with the Roman Catholics who went to Italy and France. Our people went to England. The Lutherans went to Germany. It's unfortunate; they made us not only think West, but head West. This explains why the Arab Christians, or the Arab Palestinian Christians, in particular, have emigrated. But the bulk of them, the majority of them, found themselves as refugees in the neighboring countries, in 1948. . . .

**EIR:** After the 1967 War, and the subsequent occupation, did the emigration accelerate?

**El-Assal:** The emigration accelerated as a result of Israeli rule. In Jerusalem in 1967, we had 28,000 Christians; today we have about 8-10,000 at the most—in my opinion, 8,000, though some believe there may be 10,000. The Christians in Bethlehem, Beit-Sahour, Beit-Jala, Ramallah, Nablus—the last 30 years caused many to leave, as a result of the inhuman way of dealing with the Palestinians.

The occupation does not distinguish the Arab Palestinian Christian from the Arab Palestinian Muslim. The occupation reaches all of us in the areas occupied by Israel, in their homes, in their workshops, on the streets, at check-points, in their jobs, and as a result they found their way somewhere [else] in the world.

Others, who were Jerusalemites, had their IDs taken from them by Israel, because they happened to reside outside the area, the municipal area of Jerusalem, and they lost their citizenship, their residency, and they had no other choice but to find someplace in the world, where they could settle.

**EIR:** You said yesterday that you had a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair. . . .

**El-Assal:** Yes, we did. He said they were going to war in Iraq because this will pave the way for peace in the Middle East, that Saddam was afraid, because of the weapons of mass destruction, etc., etc. I turned to him and said: "Mr. Prime Minister, the shortest way to Baghdad was through Jerusalem. Once peace comes to Jerusalem, peace comes to the world."

He kind of smiled, and I said: "I fear also that if you go to

war, you will bring the end of the Christian presence, of your faith, and my faith, in the Middle East.”

**EIR:** Have you attempted to meet with President Bush?

**El-Assal:** A number of times, but so far, we have not succeeded. . . . I think he is surrounded by advisors who tell him that these guys are this kind of a group, etc., etc. Or, the message never reached him, perhaps those around him don’t share with him, that the heads of churches, or some of us, would appreciate an audience with him. But we would love to have an audience with the President, whoever the President is, so that we can share with him our pain, our suffering, and our hopes and aspirations for a Middle East completely different from the Middle East that will be, if things remain as they are today.

**EIR:** We have a Presidential election coming up here in about ten days; do you have any hopes that things might change after that?

**El-Assal:** Well, it is difficult to say. The polls say that it is going to be tight, but if there is a change, at least you will get rid of the Christian Right, and their influence on the President. People like Jerry Falwell and the like, who are influencing his mind and activity. Kerry will lead a completely different foreign policy. Foreign policy, it seems, is dictated to the President, rather than initiated by him.

Clinton could have pressured the Israelis to come to terms with the reality of the Palestinian and his right to a state of his own. But the moment he started talking about putting pressure on Israel—and I happened to be in New York on the very day that President Arafat came to meet with him, and President Clinton spoke of the need to persuade or pressure, and what happened? As Arafat was going down the steps from his private plane, someone pulled a drawer out, and presented the world with a case called Monica Lewinsky. And Clinton didn’t meet with Arafat. They told him, we will make it difficult for you, if you pursue that road.

**EIR:** You referenced yesterday Pat Robertson’s recent visit to Israel. Can you describe what the impact of that is on the Palestinian Christians?

**El-Assal:** Very negative. He came with 4,000 people, they marched the streets of Jerusalem, they hailed the Israeli government and its policy of occupation and building settlements. And warned the Israeli leadership not to give back any of the land, because this land belongs to Almighty God, and Almighty God gave it to you. . . . They challenged Israeli authority not to give back land to the Palestinians, as if this was their sacred right to occupy the land, and build it. They committed themselves to supporting Israel, and the government of Israel, with their lobbying for what Israel is after, and supporting it with funds. I don’t know how much they brought with them this time, but I know that Pat Boone once came

with a check for \$15 million, and this was published in the *Jerusalem Post*. Another group came with \$60 million, and said they were committed to raising \$250 million; they handed the \$60 million to the Jewish Agency to help build more settlements in the occupied territories.

**EIR:** When Pat Robertson, or any of these so-called Evangelicals, the Christian Zionists, come, do they make any attempt to meet with the Palestinians?

**El-Assal:** No, to the contrary, they distance themselves from us, and they stay in hotels run by Israeli Jews rather than staying with us, the Arab Palestinian Christians. They don’t mingle with us, they don’t come to our services. They have their own kind of program, which is aimed at bringing hallelujah and praises to Israel, but they have nothing to do with us, the Christians of the Holy Land.

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## Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

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# Non-Violence and the Struggle for Justice

*The following are excerpts from a speech by Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan, the Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem, to the Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation conference in Washington on Oct. 23. Subheads have been added.*

Dear friends,

It is an honor for me to be attending the Holy Land Ecumenical Conference for the second time. I bring to you the greetings of our Palestinian people and the Lutheran Church, assuring you that our people with the other peoples of the Middle East are yearning for justice and peace.

Oftentimes, the Christian Church is criticized for being prophetic and for promoting struggle, even in a non-violent way. I have heard people criticizing us, church leaders, for speaking out loudly against the Israeli occupation, against spiral violence and injustice. We were asked: “Why do you speak out so frankly? Shouldn’t the church just focus on the gospel and leave politics alone?”

I am a Palestinian. My people and I are experiencing injustice and military occupation as well as the accompanying problems of hunger, illness, loneliness, imprisonment and being treated as strangers and intruders in our own land! What is my motivation in speaking out against these evils: Is it my personal or nationalistic feelings, or my political aspirations? No, my motivation is that I feel with my people

for I am part and parcel of their suffering and their well-being. I see and experience their oppression and pain. It is because I walk with God and God walks with me that I speak the truth and the love of God into our difficult and critical situation. And I am not only speaking truth toward those who oppress us but also toward myself and my own nation when I see injustice. How can I sing *Alleluia* or *Kyrie Eleison* or *Gloria* when people are suffering from injustice and the violation of their human rights? It is because Christ walks with God and I walk with Christ that the ultimate goal for God's creation is the liberation of humanity as well as the realization of justice. . . .

### **Occupation Is a Sin Against God**

The prophets of the Old Testament not only condemned the sin of other nations, but condemned the sin of their own people. This cost them a lot, for they were disturbing the power structures of their time in assuming their role of guardianship. Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah did not please their people and nation. Rather they pleased God, knowing they must obey God more than politics and injustice. This is much the same situation in the Palestinian church. We speak out against injustice, spiral violence, and oppression. We consider occupation is a sin against God and humanity. It deprives people of their God-given human rights and dignity. It demoralizes first the occupier and then the occupied. To demand an end to the occupation is to demand liberation for both Israelis and Palestinians from the sin of occupation. What Israel and Palestine need is only justice with peace.

Right now Israel is building a lengthy Separation Wall that is causing an immense human tragedy for Palestinians. When completed, the wall is proposed to be at least 403 miles (750 km), and in many places is made of concrete slabs 25 feet (8 meters) high. In contrast the Berlin Wall was 96 miles (155 km) and the average height was 11.8 feet (3.6 meters). It will have 41 gates for the Palestinians. The claim is that this is a wall of security, but in fact it is a wall of insecurity. It is bound to create more hatred, more anger, more outrage, because of enormous losses and suffering it is creating among the Palestinian people. The wall is being built deeply into the West Bank, taking a large area of Palestinian land. According to the World Bank, a total of 95,000 Palestinians are caught in the "seam zone," which is the area between the Separation Wall and the 1948 armistice line called the Green Line. There people are neither in Israel nor in the West Bank. They will become refugees, some of them for the third or fourth time since 1948. Other Palestinian people are losing their farmland, their olive trees and their citrus and fruit trees because the wall separates their houses from their land and their water resources.

Clemance, a teacher from one of our Lutheran schools, lives next to the newly erected concrete wall in Bethlehem.

She said: "The 8 meter-high concrete slabs are raised outside our garden and replaced with our fence. Now we only see gray wall and a small patch of the blue sky. We are, at least, glad we can stay in our home. When we previously asked about the route of the wall, no one knew and nobody cared. We have prayed and prayed. Why doesn't God hear us?"

Hanan Kandalaft, a Palestinian artist and architect, writes: "It was very interesting and totally unexpected to observe that this new barrier of concrete can give someone even more 'security,' yet it interferes in secure lives and futures. . . . The minute this image, the image of vertical concrete 'fence,' took part of our land, it created a new perception in everybody's mind . . . a new reality. It started to develop a new perception of the Open Space, an Open Space enclosed by an 8 meter-high wall. A new generation whose eyes will face a wall when looking at the Open Space and whose dreams can not take off beyond the cruel realities of life." . . .

### **Our Vision of Justice**

We have a vision of justice implemented for the liberation of Palestine from occupation and the creation of the Palestinian state according to international legitimacy. We support:

- a two-state solution, which means having the Israeli state and the Palestinian state side by side, living in peace, justice, equality and reconciliation.
- having a shared Jerusalem;
- solutions must be found to the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank including East Jerusalem and Gaza;
- the right of return for Palestinian refugees;
- shared water and other resources.

This vision is the key for justice and peace in the Middle East. The Palestinian Christian Church wants security for Israelis and freedom and justice for Palestinians. The reality is that the security of Israel is dependent on justice and freedom for Palestine, and justice and freedom for Palestine is dependent on the security of Israel. Once we recognize and accept this symbiotic relationship between the two, just peace will become reality. . . .

### **Religion Is Being Misused**

I would honestly say that there is no other conflict in the world where religion is as much misused, misquoted, or misinterpreted as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Holy Writings of the three religions have often been and are still being used to justify injustices, occupation, and the building of settlements, as well as to support actions to oppose the authorities, to retaliate or to defend one's own interests.

It is wrong that some followers of the three religions have voiced extremist opinions, claiming that these views represent their religion. Often these extremists are much more vocal and get more media coverage than the followers of the mainstreams of their respective religions. At the mo-



ment, extremists are hijacking the Middle East with their polarized visions. No one religion has a monopoly on extremism. We all have extremists, and it is our prophetic call as faith leaders today, to stand up clearly and persistently to say that any violence done in the name of religion is blasphemy and is against God's loving intention for humanity. Religion is based on the love of God and of all human beings, and should promote the respect of the rights of the other in order to achieve the common good and what is righteous for all people. When religion is twisted to fit a political agenda based on violence, hate and war, it is an abuse of religion.

In some Christian churches, the whole Bible—Old and New Testaments—is used in an eschatological way, using the apocalyptic books to justify the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and building a Third Temple, as a way of hastening the Second Coming of Jesus and the Armageddon War. I emphasize this type of Christian extremism because we Christians must clean our own house before we criticize others. With all modesty, I am afraid and ashamed that these sick ideologies, grounded not in grace but in fear, masquerade as Christianity. The Catholic bishops in Illinois in 2003 called this theology “false teachings.” I call it heresy.

### **Toward a Just Peace**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is primarily a political problem, not a religious one. Religion can, however, contribute positively to the search for a solution, and not inflame the situation further. For example, I very much respect the *Mea Culpa* prayer which his Holiness, Pope John Paul II, has made in confessing the sins of anti-Semitism of some members in the Roman Catholic Church. When we have the courage to be prophetic within our own religion, we contribute to the healing of the brokenness. This attitude of the Pope should encourage politicians, governments and leaders to recognize and confess the injustice being done to the Palestinians.

The religions have not done enough to bring about a just peace and reconciliation. All three religions have allowed extremism to grow and have a loud, influential voice. The truth is that God calls us to see the divine image not only in our own religion, but also in the others, whose faith is different from our own. When we accept the otherness of the other, we can then mutually recognize each other's human, civil, religious, national and political rights.

Religion is the art of teaching human beings not only to love God but also to love their neighbors. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught us noble principles to love your neighbor as yourself and—to bless your enemy. Each of the three religions has teachings and values to support these principles and teach people to practice them. This is peace education: to renounce hatred and violence that separate us and return to

God's love and peace that bring us together. We as religions are to teach equality, tolerance, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness. We must practice it as the true religion teaches us and as it is written in the Holy Writings. . . .

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Dr. Gary M. Burge

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## **America's New Religious And Political Convergence**

*Dr. Burge, Ph.D., is professor at Wheaton College and Graduate School. He gave this speech to the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation in Washington, D.C., Oct. 22-24. Subheads have been added.*

I am a conservative evangelical. I teach at Wheaton College, named by some as an evangelical flagship. And I fear that sometimes our “house” may no longer be serving the goal of peace. We have become an obstacle, an important obstacle. But let me explain.

Since the tragic events of 9/11, American Christians have gained a new word: jihad. Those of us who are acquainted with Islam, have known this word and its sublime meanings for a long time. But for others, it has come to represent a militancy, a strident and negative force inside a religion that is dangerous.

In this view, here is what jihad sounds like:

There will be a final climactic war in which the forces of Islam are arrayed against the paganism of the Christian West. And in the midst of terrible and heroic fighting, when all seems lost to the enormous Western armies, the Lord returns in order to validate the truth of Muhammad and protect his followers. He will also lead a conquest that will purge the Holy Land of infidels. He descends with a cry and immediately horses and animals alike explode where they stand. Just the words of his mouth superheats their blood and it explodes through their veins and skin. The slain pile up everywhere and the stench is unbearable, but the purging must go on. A cry goes out from his heralds:

“It is a righteous thing with Allah to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest. I have taken vengeance on those who do not know Allah and who do not submit. They shall be punished with everlasting destruction.”

Horsemen try to evade the onslaught. Their riders leap from their steeds and try to control them with their

reigns, but they struggle, and quickly the flesh of both men and horse are dissolved, melted away. Their flesh tears, their eyes melt, their tongues dissolve. Skeletons are stacked everywhere in the wake of the Lord's conquest. Millions upon millions die by his judgment and this—while the true servants of God rejoice.

This is a breathtaking scenario. And I imagine that if it were published in Arabic somewhere in the Middle East, many in our ranks would use it as another stunning example of Islamic violence and jihad. Proof again why we must defeat Islamic terrorists wherever we find them.

*But there is only one problem.* These three paragraphs I have read are evangelical Christian—or more accurately, Christian Zionist. In my paraphrase, I changed only a handful of words, critical words of course, and lifted them from the final 12th volume of Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins's runaway bestseller series, *Left Behind*. Here is another bit of the book, now unaltered:

Jesus merely raised one hand a few inches and a yawning chasm opened in the earth, stretching far and wide enough to swallow all of them. They tumbled in, howling and screeching, but their wailing was soon quashed and all was silent when the earth closed itself again.

This brings the final demise of those who resist Jesus on earth. . . .

Oddly enough, the very caricature Christian Zionists have had for jihadist Islam, now describes their own literature. Jenkins and LeHaye likely do not know it, but they have written a script that mirrors their very nightmare. It is properly called apocalyptic. And it is wonderfully comforting in a time of political upheaval, war, and uncertainty.

## A Messianic Course

Permit me to set out my thesis plainly: Today we are witnessing a confluence of religious conservatism with a political outlook that is on a messianic course to purge evil from the world. As I hope to show, preemptive warfare is now a divine agenda pushing us to the End of Time, when God will join our battle and bring his victory. And all of this is focussed on the Middle East. Will such an outlook impede efforts toward understanding and peace? Absolutely. . . .

The first test of righteousness in this dangerous era is to align oneself with God's litmus test, the rebirth of Israel. One conviction is always held aloft: God blesses those who bless Israel and curses those who curse Israel. Hence nations will stand or fall based on this one creed. Thus it is not surprising that hundreds of Christian leaders attend prayer breakfasts at the Israeli Embassy in Washington. At last year's breakfast on May 2, Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission,

spoke to 800 in attendance. As an American, Land said, he supports Israel because "I know a fellow lover of liberty and freedom and a believer in human dignity when I see one, and I see them in the Jews and in the nation of Israel." Land continued, "And I want God to bless America. America needs to support Israel more than Israel needs our support, because Israel has an ally far stronger than the United States of America. He is called the Lion of Judah." God "blesses those who bless the Jews, and God curses those who curse the Jews," Land said.

Note the connection here: God will measure America by our fidelity to Israel's political survival. It is for this reason that this month thousands of Christians were marching through the Old City of Jerusalem at Tabernacles, waving Israeli flags. This is the ideological imperative of every American Christian. The birth of Israel has now set the stage for the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. Therefore any national agenda that would jeopardize God's plan, any peace overture that will weaken Israel's hold on the land (such as the promise of a Palestinian state), any decision that stands in the way of this dramatic stage-setting, is not a plan blessed by God. . . .

## A Guarantee of Continued Conflict

This is not a formula for peace and reconciliation. It is instead a guarantee of continued conflict that will spill from Jerusalem to Baghdad. But this is acceptable by this view. The entire Middle East is God's stage for his final curtain call. Jerusalem will be the focal point. And as God's armies align themselves, we will seek assurances that our army is his.

Will such a view become an obstacle for peace? Absolutely.

Will such a view have consequences that spill from the U.S. to Ramallah and Beit Jalla? Absolutely.

Does such a view have any room for reconciliation with those who may be different, who may have a different vision for life and faith? No.

Surely there are obstacles on the ground in Israel/Palestine that impede the growth of peace. But these may be minor compared with the tremendous influence American political and religious culture has on the region. John Hagee is a television preacher and pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. Imagine a pastor as key speaker at the Israeli Embassy uttering these words: "Palestine has never existed as an autonomous entity." "The Palestinians [have] never owned the land and have no legitimate claim to the land now."

Evangelicalism is not monolithic. There are evangelicals who embrace this type of merger of end times scenarios with politics. And there are many, many evangelicals who reject it completely. But politics and religion are witnessing a dangerous convergence in our time. And those of us in the church—particularly those in the evangelical camp—need to rediscover our voices and alert the church.