

Reconciliation in Israel/Palestine

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INTRO

The subject of reconciliation is no mere peripheral theme in our Scriptures but is the driving force behind redemptive history. From our initial alienation from God in the Garden of Eden in the beginning of Genesis, to the hope of a restored Messianic community which we are pointed to in the vision of the new Jerusalem at the end of Revelation, the entire biblical narrative is moving to a time in which we shall all be reconciled with each other and with God. The category of reconciliation is therefore established as the basis of God's acting in history to correct that initial alienation. Currently, the church is located at the interplay between the achieved redemption acted on the cross, and the coming fullness of reconciliation, and we as members of the church are entrusted with 'the ministry of reconciliation'¹ as both a response to this reality and as a way of enacting that fullness here and now. Nowhere does that calling need to be heard with more clarity than in nations at war, and civilizations in conflict.

Today, we are currently facing the challenge of fundamentalism, whether in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in our region with the rise of the Islamic State and the continued influence of al-Qaeda, state violence, radicalization, political-religious movements and violence.

RADICAL ISLAM

The worldview of all who live in the Middle East today is clouded by violence and conflict. Political scientist Bassam Tibi discusses the challenge of fundamentalism by looking at the clash between Western and Islamic civilization. First, we need to be careful to differentiate between Islam as a religion and a civilization and Islam as a political ideology. *Political* Islam is Islamic fundamentalism and rejects the Western idea of the nation state, challenging the Western world order of secularism and human rights. Before the end of the Cold War, a new global phenomenon of religious extremism began, from which emerged increasing religious fanaticism and extremism. While some on the left argued that the collapse of the Berlin wall and the end of communism created the necessity for a new enemy that took the form of Islamic fundamentalism. Tibi argues that Islamic fundamentalists are too fragmented to create a new order, however they can create a "new world disorder." This is a new international trend that challenges the nation state system. Unlike Hindu fundamentalism which is territorial, Islamic fundamentalism is universal. "Islamic fundamentalism is an absolutist universalism, a vision of a worldwide order based on Islam. It is for this reason – and not because of an 'enmity to Islam'

¹ 2 Cor. 5:18.

--- that the debate on fundamentalism and world politics must be centered around Islam and the West.”²

The nation-state system is a European institution that formed in the early 19th century. This institution has spread over the globe, uniting national communities, destroying tribal societies, and absorbing them into a different framework. Globalization “is a structural process” with a universal outlook, and it has norms and values that stem from its Western secular worldview. While globalization has spread, its values have not become universal.

Islamic civilization holds its own non-secular worldviews, and Islam claims universality, although it has never been able to trigger “globalization processes of its own design.”³ While European nation-states emerged as a result of “political processes of mobilization and integration” and “economic processes of growth,” Middle Eastern nation states were imposed by the West. Political Islam begins its revolt against the West by rejecting the nation-state system. Islamic fundamentalists seek to remake the world, reclaiming the sciences, family, education and the understanding of order. Instead of accepting the Western concept of order in the form of the nation-state, political Islam is advocating its own form of order, but in the process, it leads to disorder.⁴

While Islamic fundamentalists speak in religious terms, they actually reflect a sociopolitical worldview through religious symbols. They are closer to modernism than traditionalism, pronouncing a new order instead of a religious revival.⁵ “They evaluate tradition in the light of modernity, and selectively retrieve salient elements of both in order to put forward a concept of political order, be it domestic...or global... In short, fundamentalists gain a boost from the failed policies of the secular regimes and proceed to question the secular nation-state as such. The divine order they envisage as an alternative model in reality leads to disorder, though this, of course, is not their intention.”⁶ “Islam has become the West’s leading challenger for one simple reason: in contrast to those of Hinduism, for example, Islamic perspectives are not restricted to national or regional boundaries. In this respect, Islam resembles Western civilization, in the sense that it is universal in both its claims and its outlook.”⁷

In short, we have a clash between two dominating powers in the Middle East and the Israel-Palestine conflict reflects this clash. One is fundamentalist Islam, and the other is Western domination. Fundamentalist Islam seeks to confront and challenge the West through countering

² Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 5.

³ Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 7.

⁴ Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 8.

⁵ Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 13.

⁶ Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 14.

⁷ Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism*, p. 15.

the narrative of the nation-state and secularization. The West dominates through economic and military superiority, and international law that is framed according to Western values.

THE CHURCH AND CONFLICT

Many Christians have aligned themselves with this Western discourse against Islamic fundamentalism without being aware that this clash of worldviews is really a clash of dominations. Many of us have embraced Western moral values without fully understanding the political implications of these values. Only recently evangelical churches began to address the political and social justice issues, divorcing themselves from the dichotomy that the Enlightenment age has imposed on our way of thinking and theology. This thinking separates between the material and divine, in sharp contrast to the Middle Eastern conception of the world.

As Christians, we often embrace a Western orientation. As a result, Muslims perceive us as part of the Western worldview that seeks to dominate it. Our theological discourse is often influenced by this, particularly in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

To move from the regional radical Islamic context to my own specific one, we face a number of unique challenges. In Israel and Palestine, a daily reality of check-points, guns, and soldiers, merely serves to reinforce entrenched historical opposition and prejudices. This means that the encounter between Israeli and Palestinian is all too often preconditioned by both real and perceived threats, in a way which does not allow space for an alternative story to play-out. So too, the relationships between Israeli and Palestinian believers are set on a course which has been dictated to them by social and political norms. Those who operate outside these paradigms are treated with hostility and suspicion. What ensues in our churches, while notably lacking the physical violence, is nevertheless a conflict where ingrained attitudes and hostilities parallel those outside the church community.

The reasons for the current failure within the community of faith to bear witness to the glory of God through unity, I believe, is because we come with a set of preconceptions which are influenced by the biblical hermeneutics of our ecclesial traditions and a Western worldview. Christians therefore operate in largely intuited theological frameworks. Many international Christians find themselves taking 'sides' in the conflict which then inhibits their ability to encourage reconciliation. This can even serve to aggravate the situation in Israel-Palestine, and in other regional conflicts.

Exploring the reasons for church complicity in ethnic conflicts, Miroslav Volf notes that, "Though explicitly giving ultimate allegiance to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, many Christians in fact seem to have an overriding commitment to their respective cultures and ethnic groups. Hence in conflict situations they tend to fight on the side of their cultural group and employ faith as a weapon in struggle."⁸ This is certainly true for our communities back home. Tensions are

⁸ Miroslav Volf, 'The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,' pp. 7-12.

largely split down ethnic and racial lines and additionally, conflicting theological ideologies add a religious dimension. Scripture is all too often manipulated in order to further legitimize established political opposition, exacerbating existing social and political tensions. In many cases, our exclusive cultural ties simply mean more to us than the universal claims of the Gospel.

As Christians however, we are called to resist those preconditions and categorizations, and through the cross we are given the means by which this can be achieved. A Theology of Reconciliation, which I will attempt to articulate here, is a proper Christian response to the situation because only the radically inclusive nature of the cross is in keeping with the universal claims the Gospel makes on us.

In Israel and Palestine, there are four contemporary theological patterns at play between Israeli Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians.

1. The first paradigm is prophecy and dispensationalism. This plays a prominent role in Messianic Jewish and Christian Zionist theology that is often married to a particular political agenda which legitimizes the establishment of the State of Israel. The biblical passage from Ezekiel 37:1-14 details the prophet Ezekiel's vision of dry bones, which experience resurrection and recreation as God breathes his life-giving breath into them. Operating within a certain framework of biblical literalism and futurism, the biblical 'land of Israel' became contiguous with a future hope for the restoration of a national entity, which was confirmed through the events of 1948 and 1967 and which has now taken on an eschatological dimension. The restoration of Israel, therefore, is not merely interpreted as a single, self-contained event, but is understood to be a forerunner of a global restoration, which will see the entire world come under Jesus' millennial reign on earth.

This interpretation of prophecy however, fails to assign a positive theological space to Palestinian people already living in the land. It is exclusively concerned with the function of the Jewish people and is articulated without mentioning the Palestinians at all. This means that Palestinians are marginalized within the churches which teach this theology. This in turn can have political and social ramifications as international churches lend their vocal and pecuniary support to the modern State of Israel.

2. The second paradigm is Palestinian Liberation Theology which arose as a reaction to a situation of injustice and conflict in order to address a need within the Christian community. It also arose as a response to some of the prophetic centered theologies. Naim Ateek in his book *Justice and Only Justice*,⁹ sets his exegesis within a Christological and progressive hermeneutic which understands earlier sections of Scripture to be a cruder and more nationalistic form of revelation than later more universal passages.

⁹ Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*.

According to Ateek the God conceived of in the Book of Joshua is simply a regression to an uncritical, primal, and nationalist conception of God which has been superseded by what we now know of God's nature through Christ.¹⁰ Instead a universalistic notion of God, such as is found in the prophets and in the narrative of Christ's death for all humanity, is in keeping with our more sophisticated understanding of God's nature. Relating this to ideas of territory; 'if God loves this land and this people, that is a sign—a sacrament—that God loves each and every land and its peoples.'¹¹ We are then to act in a way which conforms to this universal character of Jesus.

There are several problematic elements with Palestinian Liberation Theology, including the hermeneutical approach which reduces, and sometimes rejects, parts of Scripture as early forms of revelation. There is also no positive account of contemporary Jewish identity and no positive theological space given to them as a community.

3. The third paradigm is Dual Covenant Theology, which asserts that Jews and Gentiles do not both need to believe in Jesus. Its proponents claim that Jews already have a relationship with the Father, therefore they do not need Jesus as a mediator. However, this theology is against the inclusive nature of Christ. Jesus establishes one unifying and reconciling path to God. Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus' redemptive activity exclusively for non-Jews, rather salvation is *of* the Jews (John 4:22) through the Jewish Messiah. This was a privileged calling (Gen. 12:3). Paul himself, for example, speaks of his anguish and sorrow at his Jewish brother's rejection of Jesus' Messiahship (Rom. 9:1). Paul clearly endeavors to assert that the God of Israel is also the God of the world and the nations.
4. The fourth paradigm is Replacement Theology, also called Supersessionism. This is a subject of much controversy in Israel-Palestine. Underlying much of the discourse on replacement theology in these congregations is a fear that the Jewish people will lose their unique status in the believing community, along with their covenantal privileges such as the land of Israel. As a result, replacement theology is often bound up in discussions concerning the modern land of Israel and is thrown into the confusion of secular political maneuverings, used to legitimize or delegitimize claims to the land.

Replacement theology has taken precedence in church history and has a long background which can be traced to the Church Fathers and has taken many forms. Throughout the history of the church however, most forms of supersessionism have not been so positive and many have propagated violent racist discrimination, such as the myths of blood libels, the accusation that Jews engage in human sacrifice as part of their worship and ritual practice. Others have simply been an attempt to express the uniqueness of the Christian faith and, in particular, the radical discontinuity of the cross within salvation history.

¹⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*.

¹¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, pp. 110-111.

Such a problematic history and misguided supersessionist teachings has meant that today, the relationship between Christians and Jews is still one of distrust and fear. This causes a particular problem for Israeli Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians living in the land because all too often it is this Western European history which characterizes and shapes the relationship between the two.

JESUS' CALL AND THE THEOLOGICAL, POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

I propose that we need a theological and political discourse that will follow Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God and challenge both the Islamic view of divine order on earth and the Western values that divorce God from society and politics. This is a position that challenges both worldviews.

What politics would Jesus hold if he were walking among us in the flesh today? We have an excellent example of Jesus' political principles in the Gospels. We can practice the politics of Jesus today in a number of ways:

1. Recognize that the kingdom of God has come, and Jesus is king. Man does not own politics. Jesus refuses to bow to false authority and power, and power is only valid when it serves God's purposes. Jesus brings us a kingdom of truth, not privilege,¹² and God's kingdom requires us to act with justice and truthfulness.
2. Realize that God's rule is good news! In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus comes proclaiming God's good news, and that his kingdom is near. This is interesting because for most of history, rulers have been *bad news*.¹³ "God's kingdom is good news because it shows that politics is our servant."¹⁴
3. Seek to serve, not to be served. The kingdom of God has come to serve others. Jesus came to set what was wrong, right. He sought to liberate, heal, and love those in need. Politics needs to serve people, not take from them and oppress them.

Jesus focuses on gradual change of hearts and systems. "Can ordinary teaching, life lessons, good living, exposure of hypocrisy and patience change politics? Yes, they can and have, in many Christian-influenced cultures. Because kingdom politics stays with ordinary people it can solve problems that other philosophies cannot reach. A politics for the demos focuses less on leaders. It shows ordinary people that the time has come to love justice and walk humbly with their God (Mic. 6:8). It changes politics by conviction rather than control."¹⁵

It is on the cross God has spoken and acted decisively for humanity and it is the inclusive nature of the cross which should therefore drive our interaction with our neighbors. Any theology which

¹² Alan Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, p. 121.

¹³ Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, p. 122.

¹⁴ Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Storkey, *Jesus and Politics*, p. 114.

seeks to exclude rather than include, or that does not articulate a hope for those around us, does not contain within it the transformative power of the Gospel. It is only by embracing the cross therefore that we will be able to engage meaningfully in the region, and hope to see reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian believers in the land. On the cross, reconciliation, life and all its fullness, has the last word.

There are many questions we need to address in our current situation:

1. How is the church dealing with the evil and violence that we see around us?
2. How do we deal with the breakdown of nation-states and the increase in chaos?
3. How can the church be a community that meets the needs of people in the midst of chaos?
4. What is the role of the church as a voice to the political or military power? To be a prophetic voice that sees the reigning political governments fulfilling their duties to protect people, deal with disorder, and not misuse their power.
5. How can the church present a moral worldview that reflects the Kingdom of God to both the Western and Muslim world?