

The Liberation Theology of the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation

The First in a Series of White Papers Exposing Liberation Theology Organizations Working in the Palestinian Territories

Founded in 1999, the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation (HCEF) claims that it seeks to connect American Christians with Palestinian Christians. Educating Americans about the “plight of Christians in the Holy Land” is a central focus, as is building support networks and raising finances. The difficulty resides in the HCEF’s portrayal of the causes of the Christians’ many troubles – namely, Israel. “End the Occupation and all shall be well,” they endlessly preach to mainstream religious groups and college activists. While the Israeli military presence in the Palestinian Territories has certainly caused much hardship and grief, HCEF apologists refuse to admit that there is a legitimate security issue for the Israelis. Palestinian Christians have largely not participated in the Al-Aqsa Intifada, but they certainly have suffered at the hands of the terrorists. Ignoring these facts, the HCEF continues to blame the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for all of their problems. Palestinian Christians have lived in a second-class *dhimmi* status since the conquest of Jerusalem and Palestine by the Caliph Umar in A.D. 637, yet the HCEF continues to propagate the myth of eternal bliss between the Muslims and Christians of the Holy Land!

The HCEF may ostensibly promote some good programs – such as taking Palestinian Christian children to see the holy sites in Jerusalem – but they provide a fundamental disservice by perpetuating an anti-Israeli mentality. Likewise, in America, they claim to represent the Christian population in the Holy Land, but the picture that they frame is one in which Israel has persecuted the Palestinians with absolutely no provocation. The truth, of course, is that a culture of death pervades much of Palestinian society, in which suicide bombers are praised and terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad maintain wide popularity.¹ The fact of the matter is that a majority of Palestinians hold the corrupt Palestinian Authority (P.A.) equally culpable in their miserable situation.² The P.A. officially cultivates good relations with its Christian subjects because this is one more avenue of garnering greater Western political and financial support. However, numerous instances are documented of land confiscation from Christians with P.A. members involved, as well as intimidation, rape, and murder. Militant groups strategically take over Christian homes, businesses, and even churches from which to attack Israelis, knowing that with a camera nearby, the Israelis will appear to be indiscriminately attacking Palestinian Christians.³

Christian businesses were booming in the late 1990s, although emigration continued its decades-long trend. Since the second Intifada began, however, life has become one of despair, with most shops shuttered. Those who can emigrate, usually do. The HCEF teaches its American audiences that the responsibility lies with the Israelis and the American Religious Right. Only with much pressing do they admit any Palestinian faults, but again qualify the occupation as an excuse. Oftentimes they will even include an Israeli radical activist to speak at their annual conference, hoping to exploit the connection. The Palestinian Christian population is undeniably shrinking, and Americans should indeed seek to assist them, lest the only Christians left in the birthplace of Jesus Christ be foreign caretakers of empty churches. But this does not mean that we need to demonize Israel and enter into divestment strategies. Rather, a more balanced approach is necessary, of which HCEF is unable, or unwilling, to adopt.

HCEF – Leadership and Patronage

HCEF has cultivated the friendship of the Christian hierarchy in the Holy Land most successfully. The leaders of all the major branches sit on the Advisory Board of the HCEF. These include the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran, and the bishop of the Anglican Church. The largest branch is that watched over by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, headed by His Beatitude Irineos I. A major criticism of the Patriarchate is its apparent disregard for its parishioners. It happens to be the largest landowner in Israel after the

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government and actually leases to the Israel government the land beneath the Knesset, the Presidential and Prime Ministerial official residences, and many other governmental buildings. The Greek Orthodox hierarchy is often viewed to be more focused on maintaining its hold on the many holy sites under its control than concerned over its flock.⁴ Interestingly, Israel took two years to confirm Irineos in his role (unlike Jordan and the P.A.), namely due to accusations that he was too pro-Palestinian at the expense of Israel. Letters attributed to him (though he claims them to be forgeries) were overtly anti-Semitic.⁵ He allegedly attempted to smuggle a handgun to give to his ally President Arafat, thereafter being banned from entering Ramallah.⁶ Thus, the recent Palestinian uproar against his alleged role in the perpetual lease (“sale”) of Orthodox landholdings to Jewish groups is all the more ironic, for now he is distrusted by both sides. The local Synod has stripped him of his position, all three relevant states have recognized his defunct status, and even a special Synod of Orthodox Patriarchs (convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew) declared Irineos *persona non grata*.⁷ The HCEF was quick to recognize Irineos – and to condemn Israel for not so doing – but they have waited only until the very end before removing him (at least from their website).

The next largest Church is that headed by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah. The first Palestinian in his position, he taught Islamology for a number of years in Djibouti. His central message is that to “end the violence in the Middle East, we must end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.”⁸ Held in wide esteem by some Palestinians, he has been noted as praising Islamic jihad, stating that “love is power and jihad does not express weakness.”⁹ In 1999, he placed a wreath at a memorial to suicide-bombers, declaring that “Israel’s extracting our rights in all circumstances is a form of jihad” against Palestinians.¹⁰ Sabbah stated in a 2002 videotape prepared for his Christian flock that the occupation “...explains why people are tired and blow themselves up [and] the Israelis have moved only when forced by violence.”¹¹ The war in Iraq, he maintains, “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.”¹² Patriarch Sabbah is, not surprisingly, suspect to the Israelis. Such was his close relationship with Chairman Yasser Arafat, that his convoy was searched en route to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve 2001 on suspicion that he was attempting to smuggle in the chairman!¹³ Sabbah also periodically organizes demonstrations at Israeli checkpoints and other places officially as “peace marches.” The Xaverian monthly *Missioni Oggi* reports that such marches are politically-based, under orders from the late Yasser Arafat’s Fatah faction.¹⁴ Such partisanship is not supported by all of his parishioners, however. Italian journalist Sandro Magister writes in *L’Espresso* that the patriarch is actually isolated within the Palestinian Catholic community because he is “excessively aligned with the extremist currents that throw their weight around in Bethlehem and the territories.”¹⁵ Perhaps the Palestinian Christian elites should take greater note of the concerns and views of their flocks.

Another of the Board Members of HCEF, Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal of the Anglican (Episcopal) Church, maintains that there was “no problem under Arab rule” for Palestinian Christians... “We have always had a very good and cordial relationship.” Bishop El-Assal, interviewed just before the last election, hoped for a change in presidential leadership, for “at least you will get rid of the Christian Right, and their influence on the President.” He further suggested that former President Clinton had been scheduled to meet with President Arafat to talk about putting pressure on Israel, but, at the last minute, pro-Israeli enemies tactically promoted “Monica-gate.”¹⁶ Perhaps we should not be terribly surprised at conspiracy theories from such a politicized figure.

Anglican and Lutheran Palestinians have only existed since the 19th century. This seems a short time to assimilate so readily, but perhaps not if we consider that the massive Jewish immigration provided an opportunity for alliance between Muslims and Christians – forging the Palestinian identity. Bishop Munib A. Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is probably the most radical of the Christian leaders. In his interview with the Lyndon LaRouche publication EIR, he notes that “our living for 1,400 years with Islam [has taught us how to] live together as one nation.” Yet it is interesting that the history of a Palestinian Lutheran Church only goes back less than one-and-a-half centuries due to German

missionary efforts. He also states that “our relations are good with all the governments in the area.”¹⁷ If so, his demonization of the Israeli government seems inconsistent. Persecution, Bishop Younan declares, is “forbidding you to preach, or to go to church,” something he maintains does not exist in the Palestinian Authority. Is he suggesting that Christians are permitted to preach outside of their own congregation? This is doubtful, as the experience of many evangelical pastors has demonstrated. Indeed, the *dhimmi* Christians living under Islam were generally always officially permitted to attend church services or to preach within their own community, but the Islamic Shari’a form of persecution was felt in many other ways. How, it might be asked, did Bishop Younan’s recent ancestors become Lutheran if not for evangelistic efforts of some fashion?

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center

HCEF’s Advisory Board – especially the aforementioned Church leaders – are very supportive of the positions of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. Patriarch Sabbah is president of Pax Christi International, which Sabeel lists under the heading of “communities working toward a liberation theology.” Liberation theologians focus on Jesus as liberator and bringer of justice, viewing this as a “call to arms...to carry out this mission of justice.”¹⁸ In a quasi-Marxist tone, they argue that “justice requires the Church to side with the ‘oppressed,’ regardless of what they believe or how they act” – in this case the Palestinians over the “enemy”: Israel.¹⁹ Under the patronage of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Sabeel strives to “develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities.”²⁰ The Jerusalem Sabeel Document calls for a just peace emphasizing “from a moral, legal, and theological basis the urgency of ending U.S. support for Israel’s illegal military occupation.” The document demands that Israel admit its guilt and pay reparations to all Palestinians affected since 1948, as well as guaranteeing the right of return to all refugees and full withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders.²¹

The late Pope John Paul II condemned liberation theology on numerous occasions. Very directly, he argued that “this conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church’s teachings.”²² In another speech – during the first Palestinian Intifada – he strongly stated that

...When the world begins to notice the clear failures of certain ideologies and systems, it seems all the more incomprehensible that certain sons of the Church in these lands - prompted at times by the desire to find quick solutions - persist in presenting as viable certain models whose failure is patent in other places in the world...Be careful, then, not to accept nor allow a vision of human life as conflict nor ideologies which propose class hatred and violence to be instilled in you; this includes those which try to hide under theological writings.²³

Liberation theology, argues the Pope, is a distortion of Christianity. The poor and oppressed will be lifted up through salvation – not quasi-Marxist extremist political activism. Compassion for the world’s afflicted is the duty of every Christian, but through humility and love, not via demonizing one’s enemy.

Many HCEF Board Members belong to the Friends of Sabeel North America. The chief liberation theologian at Sabeel is its director, Canon Naim Ateek. Amongst his other projects, he has written an essay in which he largely rationalizes the deeds of suicide bombers. He has called the biblical figure Samson a suicide bomber, posing the suggestive question: “Was he acting on behalf of the God of justice who wills the liberation of the oppressed?” Ateek even alludes to an express similarity between the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross to a “noble” suicide bomber (a “martyr”) dying for Palestine – “a cause of pride to the family.” The central difference is the murder of innocents, which he does, however, condemn. If “many countries in the world are against suicide bombings,” it is because “Israel was

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successful in its media campaign internationally.” The Canon calls for non-violence and rejection of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which happens to be a core component of the Intifada (and often IDF policy). It is very good that he would condemn these horrific tendencies, yet rather than share this with the international community via his English-language website, perhaps he would do well to promote it to Palestinian society. Yet in a society based upon Islamic shari’a, perhaps a Christian clergyman would not be allowed and would become a target. Nonetheless, Canon Ateek ends his essay by reiterating the standard blame game: “it is Israel that is creating and breeding extremism on the Palestinian side.”²⁴ A one sided condemnation does not help the situation.

Presbyterian Church (USA) and Mainstream Denominations

Perhaps the most vocal of HCEF supporters is the Presbyterian Church (USA). It has sowed much controversy in the past year, primarily centered around its plans for “divestment” from any companies doing business in Israel. The PC(USA) hierarchy has long been known for its Left-of-Center politics and theology; that it would take a one-sided stance is no surprise. The Church has adopted most of the positions of Sabeel, weaving them into policy statements overwhelmingly in favor of Palestinians over the Israelis.²⁵ Educational events – such as a recent gathering of 200 PC(USA) leaders on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – have featured Sabeel employees and others providing a Palestinian perspective, but no Israeli viewpoint.²⁶

The moderator for this particular forum was the Rev. Dr. Fahed Abu-Akel, former Moderator of the 214th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), beginning in 2002. Rev. Abu-Akel originally hails from a Palestinian village northwest of Nazareth and is also on the steering committee of the Friends of Sabeel – North America. Although the divestment strategy was not implemented on his watch, he is, not surprisingly, no friend of Israel.²⁷ Rev. Abu-Akel came into controversy in 2004, when he sent Samir Makhoulf to speak to Wooster College in Ohio. Said Wooster’s president, “Mr. Makhoulf...made anti-Semitic statements about the state of Israel and about Jewish people based on documents [*The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*] that are widely acknowledged to be forgeries and are a direct statement of bigotry and hatred.” Among other items, he presented a slide show depicting the Star of David morphing into a swastika. Abu-Akel tried to separate himself from such an approach by turning the table and suggested that it was but a footnote in the larger context of the Israeli occupation.²⁸

Another major controversy directly involving the HCEF-aligned Presbyterian Church occurred during the meeting of an official 24-member delegation with Sheihk Nabil Kaouk, Hezbollah’s commander in southern Lebanon. The meeting – broadcast on Al-Manar, Hezbollah’s satellite television network, featured retired Professor and PC(USA) Elder Ron Stone declaring: “We treasure the precious words of Hezbollah and your expression of goodwill towards the American people.” Furthermore, he determined that “relations and conversations...with Islamic leaders are a lot easier than dealings and dialogue with Jewish leaders.”²⁹ Hezbollah, of course, is considered a terrorist organization by the US and the EU with a self-stated goal of the eradication of the state of Israel. The Presbyterian hierarchy sought to defuse the controversy with efforts at disciplining several of the delegation members, but coming right on the heels of the divestment proposal, they can do but little to better their reputation.

Former Moderator Rev. Susan Andrews, speaking at the 2004 HCEF Conference and claiming to speak for the current Moderator, defended the “bold and courageous” decision to divest from Israel, although even she admitted that the PC(USA) had divorced itself from previous balanced policies in favor of a straightforward anti-Israeli occupation approach.³⁰ Indeed, as Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism (which supports a rollback of the Israeli occupation and a two-state solution) has noted, there is a significant imbalance in the PC(USA)’s statement. The word “evil appears with some frequency” regarding the Israelis, but very rarely is ever applied to acts of Palestinian terrorism.³¹

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Extensive research on human rights advocacy by the Institute on Religion and Democracy has shown that the PC(USA) – and other mainline Protestant supporters of HCEF – have focused overwhelmingly on Israel (and the USA) – while ignoring such well-documented major human rights abusers such as China, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, a third of the PC(USA)'s criticisms came against Israel. The World Council of Churches – of which the PC(USA) is a vocal member – condemned Israel 43% out of its total critiques. What is most notable is that 74% of mainstream Protestant Church critiques came against *free* nations (specifically the USA and Israel), whereas ten of Freedom House's fifteen worst human rights violators received nary a rap on the knuckles. This includes the Palestinian Authority in the midst of its second Intifada as well as the rest of the Middle East, which Freedom House has noted is "the most pervasively *not free* region in the world."³² Such an oversight "seriously distorts the churches' message on universal human rights," adds the late IRD president Dianne Knippers.³³

Nonetheless, Clifton Kirkpatrick, PC(USA) Stated Clerk, insists that the divestment approach is in the best interest of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Al-Jazeera broadcast a letter in which Kirkpatrick rebuked US Congressmen: "It is the occupation, not our move to consider divestment that threatens the existence of Israel."³⁴ Perhaps he does not realize that such a one-sided approach only encourages the Palestinian militant approach, while reinforcing an isolated worldview for the Israelis in which they shall defend themselves (in their view) all the more vehemently. But we should not be surprised by such statements from one who – at his inauguration as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – affirmed in a true liberation theology spirit that capitalism is "unfaithful to God...responsible for preventable human suffering" and is an "immoral economic system defended by empire."³⁵

Anti-Zionist, Anti-Semitic, or Both?

Are these mainstream Protestant leaders and their Arab allies anti-Semitic?

HCEF has posted to its website the *Executive Intelligence Report (EIR)* – a publication of the noted conspiracy-theorist (and, according to many, anti-Semite) Lyndon LaRouche. The EIR followed HCEF's 2004 Conference very closely, including interviewing all of the bishops present. Accepting (or perhaps exploiting) the theme, EIR noted that the many Evangelical Christians in America – "better described as Christian Zionists" – are supportive of "Israeli fanatics," seek to expel all of the Palestinians, and rebuild the Third Temple to hasten Christ's coming. According to Edward Spannaus, the author, "The treacherous role of the Christian Zionists, exacerbated by their grip over the Bush Administration, was a recurring theme of the conference." Furthermore, support was notable and audible for the presidential aspirations of John Kerry, "if for no other reason, than that he is not in the thrall of Christian Zionists and the Religious Right in the United States."³⁶ HCEF publications and activists decry the growth of "Christian Zionists" amongst many in America (primarily Evangelicals), calling them heretics. But there is a broader effort to associate anyone who is even mildly supportive of Israel into this particular religious camp, and thus castigate them as a fanatic.

"Jihad," says Professor, Presbyterian minister, and HCEF Board Member Gary Burge, has had a "sublime" meaning to "those of us who are acquainted with Islam...But for others, it has come to represent militancy, a strident and negative force inside a religion that is dangerous." The term *jihad* does indeed have a meaning of "inner struggle", but its other, more popularized understanding as an ongoing war of conquest against unbelievers is also quite legitimate. The noted 14th century Muslim theologian Ibn Kathir was but one of many to describe jihad as such, but he was not the originator. The founder of the religion, the Prophet Mohammad, was involved in an average of nine military campaigns a year during his time in power. "Conquering and humiliating non-Muslims was a main feature of the prophet's jihad," notes one Middle Eastern expert.³⁷ Indeed, the voice speaking about jihad in the world today is not referring to the Sufi-influenced spiritual and self-improving aspect of the concept as developed only after centuries of aggressive conquest. Rather militant war is the focus. A captured Al-Qaeda manual declares: "Islam is...a complete system: Religion and government, worship and Jihad [holy war], ethics

and dealing with people, and the Koran and sword.” The distraught “bitter” situation that the Muslim world finds itself in today is – according to this most radical of Muslim groups – a result of “their abandonment of Jihad [holy war].³⁸ Many in the Islamic world employ the term “crusade” for America’s attempt to fight terrorism, but it was exactly in the Crusader era that jihadists rediscovered their war against all outside of the Muslim Community (*Umma*) – namely Christians.³⁹

Dr. Burge is referring in his article to Christian Zionists, who, he adds, have taken this militant definition upon themselves. Unfortunately, the professor is preaching to the choir, for this is the position that his theologically Leftist audience has already taken for granted. Unfortunately, they also view all Evangelicals and conservative Christians as being Christian Zionists. Dr. Burge’s one sentence to deny this association as false is about the only reference in the entire body of Conference literature. The stereotype of most mainstream Christians is indeed to equate one with the other, however unjustly.⁴⁰

Another professor, Presbyterian minister, and HCEF Advisory Board Member is Donald Wagner. Like Dr. Burge, Wagner teaches in the Chicago area, both at North Park University and at the American Islamic College (presumably teaching “within an Islamic philosophic orientation” and “in the context of the Islamic view of nature, man, culture, [and] civilization.”)⁴¹ Also akin to Burge, Dr. Wagner has published numerous articles condemning Christian Zionism, very often in such Middle Eastern newspapers as the Lebanese *Daily Star*. Declaring that the mainstream Protestant liberation theologian’s “cause is both just and biblical”, he argues that Muslims must be educated that the “Christian Right only represents a small, heretical movement of the Christian church.”⁴² Far from being the voices of the conservative Christian population as Wagner argues, PBS notes that Pope John Paul II was a much more popular figure among evangelicals than either Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson.⁴³ Although Evangelicals have been the largest religious segment of the U.S. population since 1820, the number of Roman Catholics in America has recently out-paced them. Professor Larry Eskridge of *The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals* notes that while stereotypes abound, “not all, or even most, contemporary evangelicals adhere to dispensationalism [associated with Christian Zionism] or know it well as a system.” Rather, if one must seek to pigeonhole a ‘typical’ evangelical view, “it is probably best to say that they share a firm attachment to the Scriptural promise that Christ will return to Earth one day.”⁴⁴ Knowing his audience, Wagner would do a better service to his fellow Americans and fellow Christians by being consistent and accurate in his definitions.

Perhaps, however, his strong rhetoric is purposeful. From his far-reaching soapbox, Wagner demonizes American Christians who disagree with his liberal views, telling his already suspicious Arab audience that liberal Christians like himself are their best friends; moderate or conservative Christians, on the other hand, are their worst enemies. He exploits the religious views of a succinct minority to slander his political and ideological enemies. While at times differentiating between the various definitions of conservative Christians, Wagner more often than not simply imposes one term upon another, be it conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist, etc. Fundamentalism, for example, when applied to Protestantism, properly designates those opposed to modernist (i.e. reinterpreted) theology.⁴⁵ Wagner’s usage of the term, however, would suggest to his Arab readers Christians of a jihadist nature. By naming the “Religious Right” (he means anyone not of his leftist slant) as Christian Zionists and militant doomsayers, Wagner plays upon the fears of his Arab and Muslim audience, in effect poisoning their minds and creating hostility towards America and her allies.

Like LaRouche, Wagner appears to distrust the British. Indeed, he begins his essay series by not-so-subtly suggesting that the British had been at least pseudo-Christian Zionists from the sixth century! Despite acknowledging the enormous strategic and geo-political interests that Britain had in the Middle East, Wagner is convinced that their major reasoning for issuing the Balfour Declaration towards the end of World War I was because the British political leaders were all Christian Zionists.⁴⁶ With regards to America, he relishes trying to link the Bush administration to this apocalyptic theology, encouraging the belief that the President’s engagement in the world is part of a Zionist plot to destroy Islam. Although

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Wagner condemns Christian Zionist leaders for undermining US foreign policy in the early 1990s, his own tactics have also run contrary to official policy in his years of liberal activism (especially in the past few years), even under “another Bible-toting Southern Baptist,” former President Clinton.⁴⁷

Wagner also asserts that Christian Zionists “often view” HCEF-aligned mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox with hostility, as well as attributing the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC) as “tools of the Antichrist.” If Conservative Christians, in general, are skeptical of the WCC and the NCC, it is because they are wary of delegitimizing their beliefs by compromising them in the name of an ecumenism largely controlled by the mainstream liberal Protestant Churches. Even the Roman Catholic Church is wary of these bodies and refuses to join. Such ecumenical bodies weaken their beliefs by their very nature, and all too often foray into politics, such as a recent senatorial dispute (which, politically speaking, was the opposite stance of most of the non-member bodies).⁴⁸

The NCC, in particular, has a “deplorable record of ignoring human rights violations under communist regimes.” Having embraced liberation theology in the 1970s, it channeled millions of dollars to left-wing organizations sympathetic to totalitarian regimes – not unlike the P.L.O. and its heir, the P.A.⁴⁹ Of all the human rights abuses perpetrated throughout the world, why is there such a concentration of attention on the single Jewish State? While criticisms of Israeli policy are perfectly legitimate, they often sound like echoes of historical racial and religious stereotypes. Theories of Jewish conspiracies abound, not least of all that they control US foreign policy. A letter posted to the liberal Presbyterian site of the Witherspoon Society under the heading of “Israel and ‘Anti-Semitism’” (indicating disbelief that anti-Semitism exists) calls Jews the “guests from hell” and accuses a “fifth column of Jews” of “buying” all of Congress.⁵⁰ One brave PC(USA) Elder responded that the “inability of Progressive theologies to stand against rabid anti-Semitism is telling.”⁵¹ The General Secretary of the United Methodist Church, Jim Winkler, recently accused “Neo-Conservatives” (often used as a code word for Jews) of forcing the war in Iraq for the express purpose to “ensure Israel could continue to act with impunity against the Palestinian people.”⁵² This statement strongly echoes Patriarch Sabbah’s own statement, noted earlier.

Anti-Semitic acts – violent and otherwise – have sprouted across Europe from France to Russia. While most people would associate the burning of the Star of David and marches against Israel with neo-Nazis, a larger proportion of these groups are steadfast members of the European Left, including environmental extremists, pacifists, anti-globalists, socialists, and, especially, anarchists.⁵³ These are the same people who show up to encourage rioting at any international meeting of global leaders. No one is accusing HCEF Board Members of intentional anti-Semitism, but when many of their allies in Europe and the Middle East are blatantly of such a persuasion, the former would be wise to be more cautious in whose camp they stand. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend” is not always the best course of action, although this is often the case of the anti-Israel alliance.

Palestinian Realities

HCEF Board Member Rev. Wagner insists that Muslim Palestinians treat their Christian countrymen as equals, denying the charge of persecution as simply part of a political agenda by the manipulative Israeli government and the Christian Zionist lobby. Investigating the issue in 1998, he claims that the root of the charges were in the imprisonment of four Palestinian Muslim converts to Christianity by the Palestinian Authority. They were “criminals” and “collaborators” (with Israel), however, and that was why they were jailed.⁵⁴ Does he fail to realize that this is the common charge against anyone the P.A. wishes to imprison and perhaps torture? Indeed, Wagner seems to trust the word of P.A. officials even when the vast majority of its own citizens do not.

What is the real situation for Christians in the Holy Land? Does the Israeli government truly seek to oppress them? In his testimony on Capitol Hill a few years ago, HCEF Advisory Board member Father

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Drew Christiansen noted that “for fifty years Christians have been able to prosper, relatively speaking, in Israel, with the population quadrupling in the last half century...Christians have been able to lead relatively secure lives in Israel proper.”⁵⁵ Although he does note that Israeli Arabs suffer some disadvantages, their situation is much better than that of their brethren in the Palestinian Authority-administered areas. Indeed, their population has grown from approximately 34,000 in 1949 to more than 130,000 today.⁵⁶ This speech, of course, came in the midst of the Muslim-Christian riots in the mostly Arab city of Nazareth.

Most HCEF adherents, however, would follow the reasoning of Father Labib Kobti, a Palestinian priest, who maintains that “[t]he problem has never been Muslims...Together in the Middle East they [Christians and Muslims] have created national states...”⁵⁷ Yet Hezbollah spiritual leader Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah has stated, “Even the Christians living in the Arab world unconsciously think with an Islamic mentality...they take in Islamic civilization as they do the air they breathe...”⁵⁸ While we should be somewhat suspicious of any statements from a proponent of terrorism, it is true that 1,300 years living as *dhimmi* in a Muslim world would indeed predispose a people to adopt much of the dominant culture – just for the sake of survival.

Habib Malik, another Lebanese, disputes the suggestion that all Middle Eastern Christians and Muslims view themselves as close and respected brothers living in a tolerant paradise. As he has noted:

By and large, Palestinian Christians have looked to Palestinian nationalism for a meeting ground with their Palestinian Muslim counterparts. This point of intersection has all too often been mythologized by intellectuals and clergymen who never tire of insisting that harmony has always prevailed between Muslims and Christians in Palestine. [R]emoving Israel from the equation and satisfying the Palestinians beyond their wildest dreams would not eliminate the violence against non-Muslims inherent in political Islam. Second, this interpretation is not shared by the vast majority of the region’s Christians, whether *dhimmi* or free.⁵⁹

It is not unrealistic to suggest that more than fifty years of Palestinian nationalism focused upon the reduction or eradication of Israel has brought the Palestinian people together in many ways (although they have been divided into factions for nearly the same amount of time). For over a thousand years, however, the Christian population of Palestine lived as second-class citizens surrounded by an ever-growing Muslim population given to periodic uncensored abuse, violence, and even occasional pogroms. There was no doubt as to what their status in society was. A history of “harmony” preached by HCEF and its members is indeed a myth.

By making excuses for and protecting the Palestinian Authority, the Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation ultimately helps preclude any improvement in the situation for Christians – and prevents the spread of true democracy. If they align themselves so closely with the P.A., what will happen if Hamas gains control? This is not at all unrealistic, for supremacy is a goal to which Hamas is currently progressing. Ordinary Palestinians are fed up with the rampant corruption and cronyism of the Fatah faction and are indeed giving militant groups a greater political voice. Despite decades of activity in Latin America, liberation theology failed there, as it is failing the Palestinian Christians today. The HCEF and its allies must advocate a new, alternative vision to that currently available to the Palestinian populace. Neither the weak and corrupt Fatah-oriented P.A., nor the Islamist terrorists can provide a bright future for Palestinians. Their hope will not be in an anti-Israeli ideology, nor in the hope of a conquering hero. Rather, they must seek to transform Palestinian society from within – preaching the evil of terrorism – while engaging their Israeli neighbors in peace. Mohatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were successful in their missions because they sought justice in such a way as to be blameless before the world body. It is this approach that the HCEF must embrace.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, Moshe Reiss, "Suicide Bombing: Theology of Death" in *Asia Times*. Available at: http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/FJ22Ak03.html.
2. See, for example, Fabio Forgione, "The Chaos of the Corruption," *Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group* (October 2004). Available at: <http://www.phrmg.org/Corruption%20in%20the%20Palestinian%20Authority.htm>.
3. See, for example, "Palestinian Treatment of Christian Arabs," *The Prism Group* (8 March 2005). Available at: http://www.theprismgroup.org/articles/palestinian_treatment_of_christian_arabs.html.
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