

'Justice for Palestine and Israel': A Response

June 2010

Introduction

On Wednesday, 30 June 2010, the Methodist Conference will consider the paper, "Justice for Palestine and Israel"¹ and debate its resolutions. Our serious concerns about the paper and its potential impact include:

- Its imbalance, omissions and inaccuracies
- Disturbing theological assertions and recommendations
- Its evasion of a proper consultative process
- The risk that acceptance of such a fundamentally flawed and partial report will set the benchmark for Methodist policy which will, by association, be similarly flawed and partial
- The likely damage that this paper's acceptance will do to Methodist-Jewish relations

It is with profound disappointment that we, as representatives of the UK Jewish community, offer the following critique of the report, and in this way. We place a high value on our positive relationships with other faith communities and devote significant time and resources to creating spaces and opportunities for dialogue. Dialogue is far more preferable than a conversation through documents. However, whilst those who drafted this report spoke highly of interfaith dialogue with the Jewish community, they avoided any contact with us over the year of its development. They gave us no choice but to communicate in this way, and with so little time.

This was not the only dissonance between their word and their deed. They spoke of justice, then produced an undeniably biased report. They spoke of compassion, and then they ignored or brushed aside the suffering of those in Israel whose lives have been taken or ruined in terrorist attacks, and in wars for Israel's survival triggered by her neighbours' stark refusal to accept her right to exist. They spoke of a better future for Palestinians and Israelis, then advocated a narrative of delegitimisation promoted by Israel's sworn enemies, and called for boycotts which will harm Israelis and the Palestinians that work with them.

We offer these comments in the hope that fair-minded Christians will ask for better. They will ask for a report which does not shirk from criticism of either Israelis or Palestinians, but does so on the basis of fair and impartial considerations of a range of perspectives. They will call for a process in which dialogue is not mentioned as a

¹ Viewable at: <http://www.methodistconference.org.uk/assets/downloads/confrep-14-justice-for-palestine-israel-170510.pdf>

window-dressing, but acted on as a prerequisite. They will look to play their part in bringing about a solution which is not based on delegitimisation and divestment, but active investment and participation in projects that promote justice, peace and reconciliation for all the people of the Middle East.

Our deepest disappointment comes from the fact that this tragic conflict is still ongoing after so many decades. The cycle of violence which pits populations against one another is a product of so many grievous errors and so much mistrust among both Israelis and Palestinians, underscored again in recent weeks. We share the pain that the 2009 Conference felt in its call for a Church-wide approach to the conflict, and should we be given the opportunity, we will gladly participate in prayer and action towards a fairer way forward for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Imbalance, Omissions and Inaccuracies

From the outset, the report takes a partial view of the conflict, contending that, “the key hindrance to security and a lasting peace for all in the region is the Occupation of Palestinian territory by the State of Israel” (2.1). The occupation is clearly a significant factor in the conflict, but it is not the only one. Indiscriminate terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and the refusal to accept Israel’s right to exist, which existed well before the 1967 occupation and underpins much of its military component, are at least as significant. Successive Israeli governments, including the present one, have always expressed a willingness to end the occupation, with the reasonable condition that the withdrawal be part of a settlement that brings peace and security to both Israelis and Palestinians.

The clearest indicator of the lack of balance in the report is evident in its failure to live up to its own standards. It states: “Methodists are compelled to engage with the situation as it is, to bring compassion, a willingness to listen and learn from the stories of all those involved” (3.16). Of the thirteen powerful anecdotes it narrates, only one tells of the impact on Israelis of suicide bombings and indiscriminate shootings in its universities, buses, or religious seminaries. Unfortunately, this conflict has no shortage of heartbreaking tales, but this report has hardly included any of those that speak of Israeli loss, and lacks compassion for the horrors left in the wake of indiscriminate attacks by Palestinian militants on Israeli civilians.

This is a major omission not merely for the lack of balance it imputes, but also because it fails to understand the mindset behind Israeli government and public thinking. Governments of the Left and the Right, and the electorates that voted for them, have developed policy in response to the existential threat that has faced Israel since independence, and Jews in the region even before that. To ignore this most basic fact is to cast Israel, its government and people as pantomime villains, acting without cause or compassion, and for only the most self-serving of motives.

The history section (4) and accompanying bibliography and filmography is obviously skewed. For example, the bibliography draws almost exclusively on academics known to support the outcomes recommended by the report. Other perspectives,

such as those of Howard Sachar, Anita Shapira and Martin Gilbert could and should have been included if this report was to approach objectivity. Between them, various readers of the report have noted substantial omissions or partiality throughout the paragraphs in the report. Just a few examples include:

- 4.4.2: The report describes a “massive increase in immigration, including from Arab states [where] Jewish and Muslim communities...had previously coexisted for many centuries”. But the report fails to mention that the reason for massive Jewish immigration into Israel from Arab countries was that a number of those Arab countries, including Iraq and Syria expelled their Jews in violent circumstances.
- 4.4.4: The report omits that the context for the beginning of the Six Day War in 1967 was that Egyptian leader Gamaal Abdul Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, expelled the UN peacekeeping force and moved his troops to the border.
- 4.5.3: In describing the 1973 War the report informs, “A full scale war *developed* [italics added, note the passive] between Egypt, Syria and Israel”. The active form might have explained that Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on the most holy day in the Jewish calendar, the fast day of Yom Kippur, with the explicit aim of totally destroying the Jewish state.
- 4.6.4: Where the report offers, “A new Israeli Government was elected that was opposed to the Oslo peace process and violence from extremists on both sides spread mistrust. Frustration at a perceived lack of progress towards peace led to the outbreak of a second Palestinian Intifada in 2000”, it completely fails to mention the intervening Camp David Summit in 2000. At this summit, Israeli Prime Minister Barak (of the left-wing Labour Party) offered Palestinian President Yasser Arafat 91% of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and 100% of the Gaza Strip, which the latter rejected.
- In discussing the current situation in Gaza, the report omits the corresponding context in Southern Israel, where 3,278 rockets and mortar shells were indiscriminately fired in 2008 alone, endangering the lives of a million Israelis.
- Where the Report mentions the Palestinian Kairos document (section 6), it suggests that it was issued by Palestinian Church leaders. This is inaccurate. The leaders themselves signed a separate statement that was far more nuanced.

The analyses of both the Palestinian national cause and Zionism are seriously lacking. It does not mention that Hamas, as established by its overtly jihadist and antisemitic charter, is an organisation committed to the total destruction of Israel. The Israeli Government has repeatedly said that if Hamas renounced violence and its aim of destroying Israel, the blockade of Gaza would end immediately. Sadly, Hamas are not alone in these explicit aims and actions. For many decades, the PLO was also committed to the destruction of Israel by its own charter, and Arab states collectively said ‘no’ to peace with Israel, recognition of Israel or negotiation with Israel in the infamous Khartoum declaration of 1967. Whilst Israel now enjoys peaceful relations with Jordan and Egypt, the spirit of violent rejectionism still lives on in the public proclamations of Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon, including the Hizbullah militias.

Meanwhile, while pains are rightly taken to stress that many Palestinians show an impressive, non-violent resilience towards their testing predicament (2.4, Story 1), the Zionist cause is characterised by reference to extremes (such as the testimony of the 'religious Israeli settler' in 5.1) and highly contentious assertions as to its origins. To claim that, "The roots of the political philosophy of Zionism – the idea that the Jewish people should have a homeland of their own – were largely a development from 19th Century Europe" (4.2.2), does not engage with the fact that, for almost two thousand years, Jews have repeatedly asked G-d to return His people to Zion three times a day in our liturgy.

Disturbing Theological Assertions and Recommendations

In one of its most alarming passages, the report asks the Methodist Conference, "To determine whether certain beliefs are acceptably held by Methodist members. The two areas of Zionism and Christian Zionism require exploration" (3.15). Aside from the fact that this moves towards the dangerous area of dogmatic censorship of many highly respected Methodists, it should be noted that Conference has only previously agreed to a Standing Order with reference to the Freemasons and the British National Party. It is a grim coincidence that the Hamas Charter also links a mainstream Jewish belief with freemasonry and fascism. Whilst this report tends to caricature Zionism as the preserve of the zealots of the settlement movement, 'Zionism', as many ideologies, denotes a wide range of views. The majority of these are fully compatible with a two-state solution, and most Jews believe in some form or other of Zionism. This document, therefore, seriously considers theologically proscribing a belief held in one form or other by most Jews. This is one of the many reasons why this poorly considered report is likely to cause a serious schism for Methodist-Jewish relations.

Furthermore, in requesting the Faith and Order Committee to come up with a response to Zionism and Christian Zionism (Resolution 14/5), it asks for particular consideration of 'covenant' and 'possession', approaches which form the basis of the theological outlooks of extremists and fundamentalists in all three Abrahamic faiths. The report even asks whether the Church should consider raising the spectre of supersessionism (3.4), a theological approach that it acknowledges has led to some of the worst excesses of Christian antisemitism. Whilst the Methodist Church can play a constructive role in ending this conflict, adding another fundamentalism to the mix is completely the wrong contribution.

Evasion of a Proper Consultative Process

The report is right to repeatedly call for inter faith dialogue with Jews and Muslims as a means of improving understanding of the conflict and developing joint work towards peace and reconciliation (3.2; 3.5; 7.4; Resolution 14/10). It is, therefore, deeply disappointing that no organisation representing either the UK Jewish or Muslim communities was consulted at any stage of this process. The polemic evident in the report's treatment of history and theology might have been nuanced had the document gone through any kind of reasonable process of consultation. Readers will note that no mainstream Israeli or Jewish opinions are cited in the document, except for the Chief Rabbi, who is quoted out of context (3.7) in a way that distorts his well-known views.

It has been reported that the first draft of the report was severely criticised by a number of the external readers appointed by the authors; the Council of Christians and Jews; the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine; and by Christians in the Methodist Church and other denominations. Tellingly, no further draft was shared with these parties, not to mention representative organisations of UK Jewry. In view of the criticisms already levelled at this early stage, it is naïve, if not disingenuous, for the 'basic information' section to suggest that this document could pose 'no risk' to the Church, especially when the report explicitly states elsewhere that, "In the context of the Middle East, every uttered word is analysed and dissected for hidden meaning and potential bias. Methodists need to think carefully about the words they use...in their engagement with parties in the region and their supporters in Britain" (3.13). The authors of such a report should have taken their own advice, and opted for sensitivity and dialogue instead of making a point of avoiding these considerations.

Conclusions

The Report submitted to Conference cannot be allowed to serve as the basis for ongoing discussion and policy making within the Methodist Church. It is fundamentally and fatally flawed and should be rejected by Conference, to allow a balanced, comprehensive and meaningful consideration of the issues to take place, which will in turn lead to positive initiatives for reconciliation and hope for all people in the region.

As the Chief Rabbi has said, it is a cause of concern and distress "that the Methodist Church, which has previously worked alongside others to advance the cause of faith in 21st Century Britain, is prepared to consider this Report as an acceptable publication in its name. It failed completely to present Israel's case in an even handed manner, and represents a one sided judgment of one of the most complex conflicts in the world. The report will do nothing to advance the cause of peace and will do great damage to interfaith relations in this country."

The Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Leadership Council commented further that "This skewed Report is the consequence of what has been a flawed process throughout; using questionable and biased sources, failing properly to consult with impartial experts, adopting a highly selective narrative and ascribing theological positions to Jews and Israelis that would not be recognised by most people. The result is a document replete with omissions and outright misrepresentations, which can only set back interfaith relations by years and does nothing to advance the cause of promoting understanding and reconciliation in the region. If it serves any purpose, it is to give succour to those who demonise Israel and reject a two state solution, and that should not be a position with which the Methodist Church associates itself."

Waiting for the revised report does not mean that the Church need be inactive. The Church can, and should, give its full support to initiatives that promote education, dialogue and reconciliation between Palestinians, Israelis and others. It can recommend the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine is a vital resource for UK-citizens interested in learning more about the conflict, and support the Olive Tree

peace project brings Palestinian and Israeli students, who cannot meet in the Middle East, to live and study together in London. The OneVoice movement is working hard in the region and beyond to build a consensus about a peaceful two-state solution. The Parents Circle – Families Forum, referenced in the present report, brings together the relatives who have lost loved ones to the conflict, who work together to campaign against violence on all sides and should be more widely promoted.

In both the Christian and Jewish faiths, we believe that there are few higher aspirations than the pursuit of peace. Accepting the bias and flawed attitude to inter faith relations that the report currently recommends would compromise the ability of the Methodist Church to act as a peacemaker. We hope that the Church will choose not to become proponents of one narrative in a complex and difficult debate, but rather to genuinely seek “Justice for Palestine and Israel”, with compassion for all people.