

Vigilance against Anti-Jewish Ideas and Bias

Since 2004, Presbyterians and Jews in many places across the United States have met to discuss reactions, concerns, and differences regarding Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly policy decisions on Israeli-Palestinian peace and related issues. These conversations have been sometimes confrontational and heated, almost always open and frank, and often productive of a deeper understanding of each other and of our concerns and commitments.

We Presbyterians aspire to build positive and respectful relations with our neighbors in the Jewish community, based on an honest exploration of the close ties between our two faith traditions and our shared concerns for peace and justice. One of the guideposts for Presbyterians in relation to Jews is a clear rejection of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish teaching.

- In 1990, affirming “our close spiritual ties with the Jewish people,” the 202nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stated “unequivocally that authentic Christianity can have no complicity in anti-Semitic attitudes or actions of any kind.”
- In 1987, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledged “in repentance the church’s long and deep complicity in the proliferation of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions through its ‘teaching of contempt’ for the Jews.” Our church repudiated such anti-Jewish teaching in the General Assembly document of that year, “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews.” We pledged then “God helping us, never again to participate in, to contribute to, or (insofar as we are able) to allow the persecution or denigration of Jews or the belittling of Judaism.”

We Presbyterians can celebrate the extent to which we have been able to rid our teaching, preaching, and actions of such prejudice. We take these principles and commitments seriously, and we believe that the official policies and statements of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) live up to this standard.

However, we are aware and do confess that anti-Jewish attitudes can be found among us. Our conversations with Jews in the last several years have renewed our concern to guard against anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish motifs and stereotypes, particularly as these find expression in speech and writing about Israel, the Palestinian people, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and steps toward peace. Once again, many Presbyterians have become aware that strains of an old anti-Jewish tradition are present in the way we ourselves sometimes speak and in the rhetoric and ideas of some writers that we may read regarding these matters.

Examples of such an anti-Jewish theology can unfortunately be found in connection with PC(USA) General Assembly overtures, such as the overture on Confronting Christian Zionism, adopted by the 216th General Assembly in 2004. Some of the authors cited in the rationale of that overture make use in their writings of arguments suggesting or declaring that the Jewish people are no longer in covenant with God, or make statements that echo the medieval Christian claim that the Jews are to blame for the crucifixion of Christ. The rationale and background sources cited in any overture are not General Assembly policy, but Presbyterians need to read such materials with awareness of these themes of classic anti-Jewish teaching.

When our analysis or critique of the Israeli-Palestinian situation employs language or draws on sources that have anti-Jewish overtones, or clearly makes use of classic Christian anti-Jewish ideas, we cloud complicated issues with the rhetoric of ignorance or subliminal attitudes, or the language of hate, and undermine our advocacy for peace and justice. Critical questions such as ending the occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel or the future of Jerusalem are complex and difficult. It does not help to import stereotypes, anti-Jewish motifs, or classic ideas of Christian anti-Jewish theology into our discussions.

Similarly, in a few materials that have been circulated by Presbyterians, one finds characterizations of Zionism that distort that movement. They do not accurately present the history of the Zionist movement or acquaint readers with its internal debates and ethical concerns. Instead, Zionism is often presented as a monolithic force or merely as an extension of European colonialism and result of anti-Semitism, and nothing else. In such materials, the problems and suffering of the Palestinians are attributed solely — and inaccurately — to Zionism alone. The origins, development, and practices of Zionism and its relationship to the realities of the Israeli-Palestinian situation are much more complex than such a picture presents.

Presbyterians who read writers speaking about Israel, Palestine, Israeli-Palestinian peace, and related issues (such as Christian Zionism in its various manifestations) must always read with an especially critical eye, alert to any and all anti-Jewish ideas and bias. Despite problematic passages and ideas, much of what these writers say can be helpful in describing aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility to read our sources thoroughly and not to accept anything in them that is anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic.

The voices of Palestinian theologians are of particular significance for us as American Presbyterians, because they are authentic voices of Christian brothers and sisters who speak not from the perspective of life in the United States, but out of life in the increasingly difficult conditions of the West Bank and Gaza. In what they write and say, they testify to how they understand their experience and God's relationship with them in the midst of contemporary events.

Nonetheless, writings of some Palestinian Christian theologians, and in particular those writing from the perspective of liberation theology, can raise especially difficult issues. Liberation theologians in many places — in carrying out their given task of explicating Scripture and applying it to the situations in which they live — typically claim that God has a special concern for the poor and oppressed, embrace the Exodus story as a story of God's liberation for all oppressed people, and lift up Jesus' teachings against injustice and oppression. Such emphases express important theological insights. But they can easily resemble Christian supersessionism, for example, by seeming to replace the Jewish people in their own story, or by embracing only the universal application of God's gift of land in exclusion of God's particular gift of land to the Jewish people. Or they can seem to repeat classic denunciations of Judaism, for example, through polemic that identifies today's oppressors as Jewish authorities in the time of Jesus, and so forth.

When the perspectives of liberation theology are used to understand the situation of the Palestinian people, Christian theological ideas and metaphors are used to speak about the Palestinian people and their experience in relation to the policies of the state of Israel. So, for example, some Palestinian liberation theologians identify the Palestinian people with Jesus. Some liken the Palestinian experience to the passion of Jesus, or describe the Palestinian people as being crucified as Jesus was crucified.

This is understandable, given the situation in which Palestinians are living. However, applying this reading of the passion narratives to the Israeli-Palestinian situation brings unique problems: Moving beyond legitimate denunciation of injustices the state of Israel has committed or may commit, some writing from this theological perspective indict the state of Israel as a crucifying power. The introduction of such an emotionally and theologically “loaded” interpretation may vividly express and give meaning to the suffering of the Palestinian people, but it is troubling in its demonization of Israel and the Jewish people and its echoes of ancient Christian anti-Judaism.

Most Jewish readers feel that in theological statements such as this the Jews as a people are once again being charged with deicide. For Jews this is terrifying, because the narrative of the passion and crucifixion has been used as a theological basis for the ghettoization, denigration, and killing of Jews for nearly twenty centuries. Especially when combined with sharply worded arguments that God’s gift of land to ancient Israel is to be understood only as a universal gift to all peoples and not as a particular gift to a particular people (the Jews), this kind of statement raises the specter of the anti-Jewish tradition in Christian thought.

Again, what such Palestinian theologians say offers Presbyterians in the United States an important theological reflection on the Israeli-Palestinian situation from the perspective of Christians affected by it. Yet it remains our responsibility to critique — and not to accept — those statements or ideas within it that are anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic.

In the midst of ongoing tensions between us regarding issues and approaches to justice and peace in the Middle East, Presbyterians and Jews need to be vigilant in regard to our speech about and to one another. We can and should expect our Jewish colleagues to confront stereotypes and biases they may hold regarding the Palestinian people, to avoid stereotyping or demonizing us, and to characterize our concerns and positions with accuracy and respect. Likewise, we Presbyterians can and should confront stereotypes and biases we may hold regarding Israel, characterize the concerns and positions of Jews accurately, and avoid stereotyping or demonizing the Jewish people.

We Presbyterians need to increase our vigilance in this regard. We would do well to examine our own thinking, theology, and advocacy to be sure that we do not accept or impart anti-Jewish ideas, but speak truthfully and without bias in our support of justice and peace.

[Presbyterians also have an obligation to confront stereotypes, biases, and demonization of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims as well. See the Presbyterian Packet on Religious Stereotyping as a general resource. Though they are marked by the lack of a Palestinian or Arab Christian perspective, the reflections from a Protestant-Jewish dialogue in Chicago, “What We Have

Learned from Each Other,” provide helpful insights into the sensitivities involved when Christians and Jews talk together about Israeli-Palestinian issues.]

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