

Response to Gary Gaudin's "Open Letter to the General Council Commissioners of British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada: Grieving a Missed Opportunity: some Personal Thoughts on the Report of the Working Group on Israel/Palestine."

Gary Gaudin, a United Church minister from Richmond, B.C., has raised a number of objections to the Report of the General Council's Working Group on Israel/Palestine Policy. Recommendations from this Report will go to the General Council of the United Church in August of this year. Gaudin particularly objects to recommendations for a limited "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" (BDS) policy against "settlement products that can be identified as produced in or related to the settlements or the occupied territories." (Task Force Report p. 24) He also objects to the Report "continuing to name the occupation as the primary contributor to the injustice that underlies the violence of the region" (p. 23) and regretting "the past policy of calling on Palestinians to acknowledge Israel as a Jewish state." (p. 23) Neither Gary Gaudin nor I will be Commissioners to General Council.

Like Gary Gaudin, I have taken a strong personal interest in the political situation of Israel/Palestine. For many years I avoided becoming involved in this issue since, as somewhat of a political animal, I was involved in a number of other issues, particularly that of First Nations peoples in Canada. I also thought that the issue was too complicated; since then I have come to realize that the complications were in my emotions; I did not want to be accused of anti-Semitism or to risk the loss of significant friendships while at the same time I realized that there was a strong history of anti-Semitism in our culture which culminated in the Holocaust. Conversely, I recognized that our media and society are biased against Islam and Arabic peoples.

Gradually, however, I began to recognize that this was an issue I could not avoid. Several books helped me to come to a personal position that the Palestinian people have been and continue to be deeply wronged and that the international indifference has to end. Of particular importance were the following:

Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege*. [i] An Israeli journalist, whose mother was a Holocaust survivor, Hass lived in Israeli occupied Gaza and wrote of the daily discrimination and oppression that Gazans have to face.

Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel*. [ii] Halper came to Israel as a young man from the United States and has become a well-known Professor of Anthropology; he is best known, however, for his work as head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions.

As a "critical Israeli Jew" he "knows that a 'balanced' approach to the conflict is based on a false symmetry; holding 'both sides' equally accountable and ignoring the enormous power differentials between Israelis and Palestinians fundamentally distorts the picture. There is, after all, only one state with one army involved in this conflict, Israel; the Palestinians have no state, no territory, no borders, no sovereign government and certainly no army." (p. 8) He details the continuing destruction of Palestinian homes, under different pretexts, to make way for Israeli settlements.

Marc H. Ellis, *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel*. [iii] Ellis is a Jewish American theologian who is deeply concerned about the future of both Judaism and Israel. He claims that the Holocaust is being misused to silence legitimate criticism of Israeli policies.

The perpetually repeated reason for the commemoration of the Holocaust—that never again should anyone be silent in the face of injustice—mocks an ecumenical deal [with North American and European churches] that calls for just that silence when it comes to injustices Jews are perpetuating against Palestinians. (p. 130)

Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.^[iv] Pappé is an Israeli historian now teaching at the University of Exeter. His book, based on Israeli archival sources and Ben Gurion's diary details how the Zionist movement planned to remove the Palestinian population, even before the state of Israel was officially declared in May 1948.

In Gary Gaudin's "Open Letter" he cites the teaching of Douglas Hall, "that the single most important relationship for Christians to sort through—to strive 'to get right' was with the people Israel." With respect, I submit that the single most important relationship for Canadian Christians, and indeed for all Canadians, to get right is with Canada's First Nations. That does not detract from the importance of our relations with the people of Israel.

He raises the issue of "hope" in a post-Holocaust world. This is also a central theme of the Kairos Palestine document, *A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering*, "a cry of hope in the absence of all hope." To say, as Gaudin does, that the "Palestinian peoples are hugely disadvantaged by the status quo," becomes a disastrous understatement when it is not illustrated with reference to the actual conditions these people face: house demolitions, an occupation wall that separates them from their friends, families, fields and orchards, humiliating checkpoints, restrictions on visits to sacred sites for worship, harassment by settlers, and, within Israel itself, second class citizenship. To refer to the illegal Israeli settlements, built on illegally occupied land and encouraged by the Israeli government with subsidies and with police and military support, as "the settlement issue" distorts the truth. Come clean! What is the issue?

Again with reference to the wall, Gaudin calls it a "security wall" and says it "was not built to harm Palestinians" or to "steal their land" though he admits that "government policies have enabled some of that to happen." It almost sounds like an accident rather than a deliberate policy. If I am going to build a fence to protect my property from my neighbour's cattle, the fence must be built on my property not on his. Not so with the Wall. According to B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, 85% of the wall's planned route is within Palestinian territory and "upon completion, 9.5% of the West Bank, containing 60 [Israeli] settlements" will be on the Israeli side of the wall.^[v]

Not only does the barrier surround existing settlements, but in at least 12 places it was built hundreds, even thousands of meters from the settlement, encircling additional lands in accordance with the settlements' expansion plans....

Thousands of Palestinians who live east of the Barrier [i.e. on the Palestinian side] are separated from their farmland and water sources to its west. Israel has built "agricultural gates" in the Barrier, but they are infrequently opened, or are opened only seasonally for persons who manage to obtain a permit from the Civil Administration. Obtaining a permit is a difficult process and many requests are denied....

[According to official statistics] the number of permanent permits that were issued to farmers east of the Barrier to work their land on the western side dropped by 83% from 2006 to 2009.... During this period, Israel expanded the enclosed area west of the Barrier by 30%, to 29,900 acres.

How can thievery such as this be included under the rubric of “security”? Bethlehem, not only the birthplace of Jesus but also the centre of Palestinian Christianity, finds itself completely surrounded by the Wall which became an ever present and oppressive reality, severely affecting its tourist trade. According to Aimee Kent and Terry Crawford Brown, who served with the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Israel and Palestine, “Most tourists who come to the West Bank stay in Israeli hotels and do not meet Palestinians or eat Palestinian food. To attract business the curio shops in Bethlehem usually have to pay huge kickbacks [we were told 30%] to tour operators.” [vi] As a result 97% of tourism income goes to Israel and only 3% to Palestine.

Every morning workers from Bethlehem going to jobs on the other side of the wall have to stand in long line-ups at check points sometimes with long waits.

Gaudin is correct in saying that “the State of Israel is not uniquely responsible for all that is wrong in the Middle East.” Seeking an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the 1914-18 War, in February 1916 Britain and France signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement which promised Arab independence in the region. [vii] In October 1917, ignoring the assurance given to the Arabs, Britain issued what has become known as the Balfour Declaration:

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.[viii] (Emphasis mine)

At the end of World War I Britain and France, in order to establish and maintain their own hegemony, carved the Middle East into states with artificial borders, often with rulers chosen from a minority group so they would be dependent.[ix] For 25 years (1922-47/48) Britain had a mandate for Palestine; during the Mandate significant Jewish immigration took place so that the percentage of Jews in the area increased from 6% in 1914 to 16.9% by 1931.[x] In addition there were land purchases from Palestinian peasants but by 1948 Jews only controlled about 5.8% of Palestine.[xi] This was also a time of increasing Jewish-Arab violence in which the British military also played a violent role. Hagana, an underground Jewish para-military organization, was founded in 1920 and the Irgun in 1931. [xii]

When Britain found the issue too hot to handle it turned the Mandate over to the United Nations in 1947 and formally withdrew on May 15, 1948. The United Nations established a Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to consider two possible courses of action: 1. Establish a single federated state for both Jews and Arabs, or 2. Partition into Arab and Jewish states “with economic union and freedom of transit between them; and a demilitarized Jerusalem, under a United Nations governor.”[xiii] Lester B. Pearson, Canada’s future Prime Minister, chaired the sub-committee which drew up the detailed plan for partition—which was eventually accepted by the United Nations in Resolution 241 on November 29, 1947. Arab Palestinians boycotted discussions about the partition which allocated 56% of the land to an Israeli state when less than 1/3 of the population was Jewish. “The native people of Palestine, like the native people of every other country in the Arab world, Asia, Africa, America and Europe, refused to divide the land with a settler community.”[xiv] How would Canadians react if some United Nations committee proposed to divide our country and give 56% of it to a minority group of recent immigrants? Palestinian resistance, although violent, was sporadic and uncoordinated whereas the Zionist response, through the well-organized Hagana and Irgun para-militaries was swift and brutal.

In March 1948 the Israeli campaign moved from retaliation against Palestinian resistance and violence “to cleansing operations.”[xv] Plan Dalet was adopted by Ben Gurion’s ‘Consultancy,’ which masterminded the campaign, on March 10, 1948. It says in part:

These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their debris) and especially of those population centers which are difficult to control continuously; or by mounting combining and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the villages, , conducting a search inside them. In case of resistance the armed forces must be wiped out and the population expelled outside the borders of the state. [xvi]

Thus, although the village of Deir Yassin had signed a non-aggression pact, it was attacked on April 9, 1948 (before any Arab armies had invaded) and the population massacred. [xvii]

These facts call into question Gaudin’s statement that Israel “did not start the 1948 war which greeted its re-establishment. It did not seek out an opportunity to create generations of Palestinian refugees.” I agree with him that “There is a need to broaden our understanding of the entire historical context of the Arab-Israeli conflict if we are going to more fully understand the Israeli/Palestine conflict.” Unless we are prepared to go back to Queen Isabella of Spain, Ilan Pappé’s book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* is a good place to start.

Gaudin grieves “that in this Report we feel we have the right, perhaps even the obligation, to define for ourselves what the language of ‘the Jewish State’ means.” The Report does not do this; instead, after a discussion of the different meanings attached to the term, and of the negative implications of this definition for Israel’s 20% Palestinian minority, it concludes that “any United Church affirmation of Israel as a Jewish state must be accompanied with a clear explanation of its meaning.... It is unacceptable to insist that Palestinians accept Israel as a Jewish state as a precondition of continuing negotiations.” (p. 15). Surely the United Church has the right and the obligation to understand the implications of the language it uses and to act accordingly.

Gaudin says, “Where genuine peace negotiations with Arab neighbours have been possible, Israel has pursued them. But how do you negotiate with those who are not willing to acknowledge your right to exist (such as Hamas)?” This attitude of Hamas is foolish, wrong and works against creation of a just peace in the area. At the same time as they have maintained this rhetorical position, my understanding is that they have been willing to negotiate with Israel. Western countries such as Canada have only exacerbated the situation by refusing to recognize the democratically elected government of Gaza and cutting off aid. The Israeli attack on Gaza with over 1300 deaths has served to entrench the militancy of Hamas.

But while Hamas continues to have a nasty, irresponsible and inhuman rhetorical position, Israel continues a nasty, irresponsible, inhuman and illegal occupation of Palestinian land and oppression of the Palestinian people.

In terms of “genuine peace negotiations” Israeli President Shimon Peres, commenting on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, said “In principle, Israel agreed but there were some conditions that Israel couldn’t accept... For example, that Israel has to bring back all the refugees.”[xviii] The right of refugees to return to their homeland is recognized by international covenants and with respect to Palestinians

forced from their country during the Nakba (or catastrophe as they refer to the loss of their homes and lands) this is specifically recognized in the 1948 UN Resolution 194.[xix] This right has a deep hold on Palestinian life as well as on that of the refugees; one of the symbols of their continuing hope is that of a key—a key to the door of their former homes. The Report has a helpful discussion of this issue and concludes:

In pragmatic terms, even in the Palestinian community the right of return is understood as a fundamental human right that could be resolved through negotiation. Palestinians should not be asked to give up a basic human right afforded to all refugees, and Palestinian officials have proposed ways forward. (p. 17)

There cannot be “genuine peace negotiations” so long as Israel refuses to recognize this basic right as the basis for further discussion.

Gaudin grieves “that we are proposing, that because the term “apartheid” might at some point become applicable, we are not going to reject its use in the current dialogue.” I do not read this in the United Church Task Force Report. Rather the Report says (p. 18):

The working group believes the charge of apartheid applied to Israel shuts down conversation, disempowers those who desire and work for change in Israel, and does more to harm than to help the potential for successful peace negotiations. The working group therefore recommends that use of the language of apartheid be avoided.

I, however, grieve that Gaudin says that the United Church position can begin to sound like not so-distant echoes of anti-Semitism.” To criticize Israeli policies is not anti-Semitic. As Rima Berns-McGown says,

What is anti-Semitic is to suggest that Israel’s problematic actions and policies exist because there is something inherently evil in Jews or Judaism. This is a very, very important distinction....

I am very concerned that in their desire to protect Israel, spokespersons for some of the major Jewish organizations mistake legitimate criticism of Israel for anti-Semitic disparaging of Jews and Judaism. I am also concerned that this very mischaracterization of Israel in itself provokes anti-Semitism. [xx]

Gaudin grieves “that we Christians have arrogated to ourselves the role of prophet in this issue and think that we must remind the people of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hosea of their prophetic heritage.” I remind him of our prophetic heritage as a Christian church. Gaudin’s statement brings to mind the time when Amos, a Judean, spoke out against the injustice that flourished in Israel of his day. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, called it conspiracy and said to Amos, “O seer, go away, flee to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the temple of the kingdom.” (Amos 7:12-13). This is the Amos who saw “the Lord standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.” (7:7-9). It is the same Amos who called out “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” (5:24). Once again the Israelis need to hear that vision of God’s justice, to see God’s plumb line against the oppressive wall that denies justice to Palestinians. “The Lord God has spoken: who can but prophecy.” (3:8)

The prophetic word calling to righteousness is spoken to all of us, Canadians, Israelis, Palestinians and the entire global community and by the plumb line of God's justice all of us are much less than upright. We live in a world where we all need to be mutually accountable and to speak the prophetic word to each other. When Olivier De Schutter, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food visited Canada in May of this year and pointed to serious problems with food security, our government unfortunately assumed the role of Amaziah when we need is to pay close attention to the message of poverty among us.

While, as Gaudin says, the call for limited economic sanctions may have a negative impact on Palestinian employees of the companies affected, this is something that responsible Palestinian leaders, with the support of the people, have considered and called for. This is one way for global citizens to put non-violent pressure upon those companies which profit from the illegal occupation of Palestinian land. Although, as both Gaudin and the Report indicate, any action taken by the United Church will have a limited effect, it will be a small part of a global campaign that will be significant.

I agree wholeheartedly with Gaudin's call "for a permanent theological dialogue between the Jewish community of Canada and the United Church of Canada." But this dialogue must be with all sections of the Jewish community who are willing to share such a dialogue with us—including groups such as Independent Jewish Voices. It must also be a dialogue that is open to honest criticism of Israeli policies and not subject to closure whenever the Church speaks critically or takes action in accord with that criticism.

In conclusion, I am hopeful that the United Church General Council this August will adopt the Task Force Report Recommendations as one small step towards justice, peace and security for both Palestinians and Israelis. Salaam/Shalom.

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[i] Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege*, (New York: Owl Books, 1996).

[ii] Jeff Halper, *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel*, (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

[iii] Marc H. Ellis, *Judaism Does Not Equal Israel*, (New York, The New Press, 2009).

[iv] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

[v] B'Tselem, *Human Rights In the Occupied Territories, 1 January 2009 to April 30 2011*, (Jerusalem: B'Tselem—the Israeli Information for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 2010,) p. 30.

[vi] Aimee Kent and Terry Crawford Brown, "Bethlehem—The Politics of Tourism," *Faith Under Occupation: The Plight of Indigenous Christians in the Holy Land*, (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre, World Council of Churches, 2012,) p. 18.

[vii] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989,) p. 195.

[viii] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, p. 297.

[ix] Rifat Odeh Kassis, *Kairos for Palestine*, (Palestine: Baday/Alternatives, 2011) p. 44.

[x] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006.) pp. 282-4.

[xi] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 18.

[xii] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 283-4.

[xiii] Lester B. Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson: Volume 2, 1948-1957*, ed. John A. Munro and Alex.I. Inglis, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973,) pp. 213 ff.

[xiv] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, pp. 33-34. The quotation is from Walid Khalidi.

[xv] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 40.

[xvi] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, p. 39.

[xvii] Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, pp. 90-91; cf. *New York Times* April 10, 1948

[xviii] Patrick Martin, "Even a dove likes to have a deterrent," *Globe and Mail*, May 5, 2012, F3.

[xix] Rifat Odeh Kassis, *Kairos for Palestine*, p. 125.

[xx] Rima Berns-McGown, "Dear Parliamentarians...", Michael Keefer ed. *Antisemitism Real and Imagined: Responses to The Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism*, (Kitchener, ON.: Pandora Press, 2010,) pp. 62-63.