



International Council of Christians and Jews Internationaler Rat der Christen und Juden

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"LET US HAVE MERCY UPON WORDS."

A Plea from the International Council of Christians and Jews to All Who Seek Interreligious Understanding

During its annual meeting from 20-24 June 2010 in Istanbul, Turkey, the Executive Board of the International Council of Christians and Jews was dismayed to receive accounts from around the world of increasing polarization in the discourse between Jews and Christians and also within each community. According to many of our members, extreme viewpoints seem to be increasing in popularity, while efforts toward moderation or compromise are rejected as disloyal or naive.

This polarization appears to be caused in large part by the continuing lack of progress in normalizing relations between Israelis and Palestinians and in achieving the goal of two states of Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Instead of the open discussion of complicated issues, Jews and Christians who critique the current reality are delegitimized or silenced, while expressions of antisemitism and Islamophobia abound. In such a heated climate, the use of certain charged phrases, such as "end the Occupation" or "the survival of Israel" can trigger reflexive condemnations, regardless of the thoughtfulness or good will of the writer or speaker. The degree of vehemence seems to be reaching an unprecedented crescendo in many places.

As an organisation committed to interreligious dialogue to promote understanding and enrichment between Jews and Christians (and indeed all people), this increasingly "no holds barred" rhetoric is particularly distressing. It contradicts fundamental values of human respect in both our traditions.

Several recent incidents could illustrate the present volatile atmosphere, but we will only consider one particular example because it is a text composed and discussed by religious leaders, who we believe have a special responsibility to promote interfaith respect. We are referring to published reactions to the December 2009 statement by a group of Palestinian Christians entitled, "Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering." We find admirable aspects to the document even though we object to many of its proposals and phrasings.

The genre of the document is a lament. It addresses fellow Palestinian Christians, then local leaders, Palestinian and Israeli society, the international community, and Christians around the world. It proceeds to describe the deteriorating conditions of Palestinian life. It particularly assails the use of the Bible to justify the taking away of rights from Palestinians [2.2-4; 6.1]. This use of the Bible has the pastoral effect of depriving Palestinian Christians of scriptures that could offer them inspiration and hope. The statement bemoans the Palestinian situation as a catastrophe that seems to continue with no end in sight, attributing this to "the Occupation."

What strikes us as admirable is that despite the hardships that the text relates, it does not descend into rage, hatred, or even — as is sadly all too common today — empty polemic. Instead, the document manifests generosity of spirit and offers some weighty religious insights, which might not be expected from a lament.

It asserts the common humanity of everyone as made in the image of God [2.1; 8]. It sees the Land as meant to be a holy place where Jews, Christians, and Muslims can come together in love and mutual respect [5.4]. It rejects all forms of violence by anyone [5.4.3]. It insists that the Bible cannot be used to justify the violation of human rights, but must inspire faith, hope, and love [2.4]. It urges that interreligious dialogue and education occur despite its difficulties [3.3.2; 9.1]. It extends a message of love and hope to Jews and Muslims [5.4]. The Palestinian authors of the document offer a profound Christian conviction which some critics overlook: "Just as Christ rose in victory over death and evil, so too we are able, as each inhabitant of this land is able, to vanquish the evil of war" [3.5].

The spiritual encouragement that the document could offer to demoralized Christians seems to us a worthy and essential exercise in pastoral care. It seeks to bring hope to young people who could easily be tempted to hopelessness and desperation. It looks ahead to preparing Palestinian Christians to be partners with Israelis when the day comes that two independent states actually exist [9.1-2].

This is not to say that we do not have strong differences with certain features of Kairos Palestine, some of which we will briefly note. However, our main purpose in so doing is to encourage open and honest conversation among religious leaders, in contrast to the widespread present tendency to misrepresent or distort different perspectives. We hope that these questions, posed to promote dialogue and clarity, might be useful to the Kairos Palestine authors if they ever compose a commentary or a second edition of it.

1. There appears to be a studied ambiguity in some phrasings, encouraging justifiable readings that range from extremely positive to extremely negative, depending on the orientation of the reader. To take one example, the title "Kairos Palestine" is surely intended to recall the famous 1985 "Kairos Document" from Soweto, South Africa, which like Kairos Palestine also challenged churches to intervene on behalf of an oppressed and demoralized people. Do the authors of Kairos Palestine mean to suggest that Palestinian Christians or Palestinians in general are experiencing apartheid, or that an apartheid state is inevitable without some change, or is the allusion to South Africa a rhetorical strategy? It would be helpful if the meaning the authors intended by the title was explicit.
2. There are certain tensions in the text. Are these deliberate or the result of the document being committee-authored? For example, point 1.5 describes previous peace negotiations as ineffectual, observes that some "political parties followed the path of armed resistance," and goes on to accuse Israel of "using this as a pretext" to justify their "war against terror." But the paragraph does not define "armed resistance" or explicitly reject the use of violence as it does elsewhere in section 4. Even in that section there is ambiguity. The document expresses "esteem for all those who have given their life for our nation" [4.2.5]. Does this include suicide bombers or snipers who might have viewed themselves as martyrs for the Palestinian nation? This vagueness invites skepticism about the sincerity of the text's high principles.
3. We agree with Kairos Palestine that Jewish religious attachment to *Eretz Yisrael* and biblical promises concerning the Land cannot be simplistically interpreted to justify modern politics, policies, or boundaries. However, the document is again ambiguous when it asserts that "our land has a universal mission" that is a "prelude to complete universal salvation" [2.3]. Does this stress on eventual universality invalidate the particularity of Jewish religious attachment to the Land today or is it only a rejection of an exclusively Jewish religious claim upon it?
4. Our plea for everyone to "have mercy upon words," as explained below, also applies to the document's ambiguous use of highly charged theological phrases, such as "letters of stone," "sin," and "holy war." While such expressions may be understandable in dire straits, they are often counterproductive to the goal of significant conversation among contending forces. What did the authors seek by using such freighted terms without clear definition or explication?

5. The understandable cry to "end the Occupation" is put forth as if only one party, the State of Israel, has sole responsibility for its establishment and continuance. But just as the beginnings of the present "sinful situation" are due to the actions of many regional and international powers, do not neighboring countries, their proxies, and the international community also have essential roles to play in order for Palestinian statehood to be realized? Although a broader vista appears in point 7, it calls only for the international community to institute "economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel" without regard for any needed actions by other parties. We disapprove of this constricted focus both in principle and in terms of its likely effectiveness to achieve the aim of building two neighboring states of Israel and Palestine.
6. Section 9.3 speaks of "the state" in the singular, leading some to ask whether the authors of Kairos Palestine are committed to the "two state solution," or are they only referring to "the state" in general terms to assert that any "state" ought not to have an established religion?

These and other serious objections or questions about Kairos Palestine do not outweigh our appreciation for its spiritual dimensions as noted above. Our main purpose in discussing the document is not to analyze its weaknesses, but to seriously engage its authors in the kind of respectful dialogue that we believe is essential for mutual respect among all religious communities, especially ones afflicted by political conflict. We sympathize both with those Palestinians who feel that the likelihood of a Palestinian state seems to be dwindling and with those Israelis who fear that their hopes to live in friendship with their Palestinian neighbors are a pipedream.

We also see in some responses to Kairos Palestine further evidence of growing polarization, antithetical to dialogue, that deeply concerns us. Rather than seriously grappling with its strengths and weaknesses, some critics come across as construing any ambiguities in the most negative light, making spurious assertions that delegitimize the document. For example, one allegation circulated on the Internet is that the term "dead letter" in the statement [2.2.2] is a supersessionist demeaning of the Hebrew scriptures. In fact the phrase clearly refers to fundamentalist applications (presumably both Christian and Jewish) of the Bible to current geopolitics, which transforms the text from a living tradition that is subject to interpretation by people of faith today into a stagnant fossil from the past. Another writer exaggerated the document's critique of Israel by describing it as "demonizing" Israel. Such overstatements are a sign of the present militant atmosphere in which authentic religious convictions can be ignored. "Love is the commandment of our Christ our Lord to us and it includes both friends and enemies" [4.2] declare the Christian authors of Kairos Palestine. Does cynicism hold such sway in the present climate that authentic spiritual expressions, in this case a Christian one, must be contemptuously ignored?

On many occasions, the late Rabbi Leon Klenicki (1930-2009) would intervene at contentious moments in the interreligious encounter to implore everyone to "have mercy upon words." We urge all those involved in interreligious dialogue around the world to consciously resist the forces that promote polarization and undermine the very possibility of such dialogue.

We join all those who love the Land called holy by three interrelated religions in being impatient for the day when it truly will be a sign of interreligious cooperation and even love between the nations of Israel and Palestine. Meanwhile, let our impatience be tempered by having "mercy upon words" so that through dialogue mutual understanding may grow.