



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

Reflections on the Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups in
Promoting Reconciliation about and in the Troubled Middle East

Shavuot / Pentecost - 2013/5773

'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope'.¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction

In response to requests from national member organizations, the ICCJ Executive Board, including the co-chairs of ICCJ's International Abrahamic Forum, met in London from 11-15 February 2013 to discuss the polarization triggered by the protracted conflicts in the Middle East, especially the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. We decided to circulate these reflections as a resource for the member organizations and to issue them publicly in hopes of being of wider service. We draw upon our decades of experience in promoting Jewish-Christian amity, and are guided by the Mission Statement of the ICCJ.

2. ICCJ's Mission and Legacy

ICCJ promotes understanding and cooperation between Christians and Jews based on respect for each other's traditions, identity, and integrity. Our International Abrahamic Forum pursues trilateral interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

We recognize that intractable political and legal disputes will be resolved not by religious groups living thousands of miles away, but by political and diplomatic leaders and citizens on the ground, with the aid of the international community. We know that a bewildering array of partisans propagate misinformation, polemic, and appeals to fears and bigotry that draw upon antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian stereotypes. We also are painfully aware that religious traditions can be put to destructive ends.

Still, we are convinced that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have the capacity and indeed the responsibility before God to draw upon their respective religious heritages in the service of peace and human reconciliation. This can happen through the kind of dialogue that fosters reconciliation among estranged or hostile people, a dialogue that requires all participants consciously see each other as equally God's children.

In today's contentious context, this vision may seem naïve or be disparaged as a corrosive interreligious or ecumenical 'bargain' or as disloyal to one side or the other. To us such criticisms reflect a binary way of thinking that insists that people must be either 'pro-Palestinian' or 'pro-Israel'. We espouse a 'pro-people' vision that is both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, precisely because dialogue demands that multiple narratives be heard.

Our perspectives flow from our mission to be a sanctuary of trust where fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes can be exchanged. We invite our national member organizations to continue to pursue this goal as well. Although we have made great strides in recent decades in promoting interreligious understanding, the future requires religious people everywhere to become better and better agents of dialogue.

¹ Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem. Quotation used with his kind permission.

3. Recent ICCJ Efforts Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Through statements such as 2009's 'A Time for Recommitment' and 2010's 'Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words', through conferences such as 2009's 'From Two Narratives to Building a Culture of Peace', and conversations with Palestinian Christians in 2011, ICCJ has consistently advocated for bilateral and trilateral interreligious dialogues to contribute to peace by eliminating caricatures and promoting authentic mutual understanding.

Regrettably, it seems to us that some recent statements emanating from the Middle East and elsewhere are becoming more intransigent. ICCJ believes that one-sided declarations only provoke insecurity and fear, and so do not increase the likelihood of peace.

Having said this, however, we must also state our conviction that the persistent failure to resolve the issues between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israel and neighbouring states, is increasingly dangerous and untenable. We have no interest in apportioning blame among the many parties who have contributed over the decades to bringing circumstances to their present impasse. We simply long for the end of the current situation.

4. A Growing Urgency

During the discussions of the ICCJ Executive Board in London, there was a general consensus that the status quo is intolerable. We noted several reasons, including the unjust stateless condition of Palestinians; increasing antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian rhetoric; the growing risk of widespread violence; and mounting frustration that leads more and more people to embrace simplistic 'solutions'.

ICCJ is convinced that despair is not an option. In the words of Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem, 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope', which, of course, applies across the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

5. Putting Discussions of the Middle East into Context

Although we have all learned from interreligious dialogue that participants bring different agendas, perceptions, and vocabularies to the encounter, these lessons often seem forgotten when turning to volatile Middle East topics. We discussed this in connection with specific terms: Israel, Holy Land, Zionism, and prophecy. In the full text of these reflections, we explore the varying connotations of each of these phrases.

6. General Perspectives

The Executive Board sought consensus on some general principles that it could use to guide its own activities and that might also provide helpful suggestions for ICCJ member organizations. In outline form, these are:

- A. If people committed to profound interreligious friendships avoid or ignore subjects of great importance, they risk reducing these friendships to superficial relationships.
- B. Conversations about the convoluted Middle East conflicts need to be carefully defined and structured.
- C. We recognise that dialogues that do not consciously reckon with unequal power relationships can actually help preserve inequitable situations.
- D. Any particular proposals for action should be assessed as to whether they will increase feelings of fear or insecurity, will polarize, or seem to represent only one of the many narratives of the conflicts.
- E. We are highly sceptical of simplistic proposals presented as 'the solution' to the present impasse. Only a comprehensive and complex process will be effective and lasting. Such a process must occur in the political and diplomatic realms where it is axiomatic that when legitimate rights clash, compromise is necessary.

- F. We believe that people discussing the Middle East need to recognize the complex history that led to the present situation and be open to hearing multiple narratives. They should be aware that what is a minority perspective in one context can become the majority perspective if the context shifts. All need to become conscious of their unconscious biases.
- G. Frequently in dialogue, the crucial factor is not what someone says but how they are heard. Patience in bringing to light such miscommunication is an urgent priority.

7. The Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups

Religious groups and interreligious groups such as ICCJ will not resolve a conflict that is geopolitical in nature. As frustrating as it is, solutions lie in the purview of governments, diplomats, and political leaders.

We should, naturally, urge our respective governments to take steps that promote peace and criticize actions that aggravate the conflict. However, we believe that such political actions should neither be couched in self-serving religious appeals, nor based on one-dimensional perspectives that do not reckon with the many legitimate and contradictory rights of all involved in the conflict. We believe that all religious persons, wherever they live, should above all promote understanding and reconciliation.

For us this occurs through dialogue, and dialogue requires an openness to changing our own hearts because of what we have learned from others' hearts. Therefore, we reject current appeals to resist 'normalization' when that term means to end all conversation or interaction that might lead to independent Israeli and Palestinian states. We agree that the status quo is neither 'normal' nor acceptable, and that seeking to impose a solution that is not based on the agreement of all relevant parties is futile.

We know from experience that substantive dialogue demands a willingness to be self-critical, to examine our own consciences, to engage in a reckoning of the soul. In our discussions, we felt the need to ponder the potential to promote bigotry or intolerance within our respective religious traditions. This led us to offer specific suggestions to Jews, Christians, and Muslims that are described in the full text of these reflections.

We believe the primary role the 'Abrahamic' religions should play with respect to the Middle East is the promotion of reconciliation and peace among their three traditions. Due to historical memories and the woundedness of all the peoples concerned, this is not an easy task. We encourage religious thinkers to enhance the elements in all three traditions that foster mutual esteem and respect, and to pursue what might be called a 'theology of belonging'. This theology, which involves the self-identities of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, would recognize that all three communities 'belong' in the Land that, in different ways, is holy to them.

8. Invitation to Dialogue

The reflections conclude with the urgent call for everyone committed to interreligious amity, for everyone who cares about the 'Holy Land', not to lose hope. The difficult path of dialogue is the only sure road to reconciliation. We appeal to Jews, Christians, and Muslims everywhere to speak to one another and to be open to one another, setting aside the temptations of polemic and bigotry and stereotype in the service of the peace.

After extending a number of specific invitations to further dialogue, the reflections offer the prayer that it be God's will, *insha'Allah*, that heavenly peace will soon embrace all the peoples of the Middle East. Despite the hardships, we believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims must constantly struggle toward reconciliation, relying on God's help to do so because: 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope'.



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FULL TEXT

1. Introduction

As time passes, the vision of 'a Middle East where all can live securely in independent, viable states rooted in international law and in guaranteed human rights'³ seems more and more out of reach. In particular, the protracted stateless situation of Palestinians provokes debate and polarization among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in many parts of the world.

This interreligious discord—even where there has been friendly dialogue for decades—has prompted a number of national member organizations of the International Council of Christians and Jews to seek the advice and guidance of the Executive Board. Having itself been concerned about this for some time, the Executive Board gathered in London, United Kingdom from 11-15 February 2013 for sustained conversation on the situation.

Blessed by an atmosphere of trust and fellowship, the Executive Board members, including the co-chairs of the ICCJ's International Abrahamic Forum, engaged in frank and spirited exploration of the enormously complex issues involved. We decided that we would compose these reflections for the national member organizations of the ICCJ in order to assist their intergroup efforts locally. We saw this as our responsibility as the Executive Board of an international organization dedicated to interreligious understanding. We also agreed to make them available to the general public in hopes they might be of wider service.

We further agreed that we should speak from ICCJ's decades of experience in seeking rapprochement between Jews and Christians around the world. We realized that the many centuries of animosity between Christians and Jews endured far longer than the interreligious hostility found in the Middle East and elsewhere today. Yet in our lifetimes we have seen a new positive relationship arise between long-estranged Jews and Christians, though it is still very young and needs constant nurturing. We also found ourselves referring frequently to the Mission Statement of the ICCJ to guide our discussions, and we invite our national member organizations to do the same.⁴

2. ICCJ's Mission and Legacy

Founded in the context of an 'Emergency Conference on Antisemitism' held in Seelisberg, Switzerland in 1947, the ICCJ claims no expertise in international geopolitics. We are a Council that promotes understanding and cooperation between Christians and Jews based on respect for each other's traditions, identity, and integrity. Our International Abrahamic Forum pursues trilateral interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

² Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem. Quotation used with his kind permission.

³ International Council of Christians and Jews, 'A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians' (2009), The Twelve Points of Berlin, 4.

⁴ Available at: <http://www.iccj.org/About-us.2.0.html>

We recognise that intractable political and legal disputes will not be resolved by religious groups, especially those living in other parts of the world. They must be settled by the governmental leaders, diplomats, legal experts, and voters of the parties on the ground, with the aid of the international community. We know that a bewildering array of partisans advance their views through misinformation, polemic, and appeals to fears and bigotry that draw upon antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian stereotypes. We also are painfully aware that religious traditions can be put to destructive ends.⁵

Nevertheless, we are convinced that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have the desire and indeed the responsibility before God to draw upon their respective religious heritages in the service of peace and human reconciliation. This is expressed in our Mission Statement, which notes that the ICCJ:

- addresses issues of human rights and human dignity deeply enshrined in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity;
- counters all forms of prejudice, intolerance, discrimination, racism and the misuse of religion for national and political domination;
- affirms that in honest dialogue each person remains loyal to his or her own essential faith commitment, recognizing in the other person his or her integrity and otherness;
- encourages research and education at all levels, including universities and theological seminaries, to promote interreligious understanding among students, teachers, religious leaders, and scholars;
- provides a platform for wide-ranging theological exploration in order to add a religious choice to the contemporary search for answers to existential and ethical challenges.

In considering this mission in the light of the current polarized climate, the Executive Board reflected on its experience of interreligious dialogue. Authentic dialogue, the kind of dialogue that can lead to reconciliation among estranged or hostile people, requires that all participants consciously see each other as equally God's children. Therefore, the 'other' deserves to be given a place in our hearts.

In today's contentious Middle East context, this vision may seem naïve. It is disparaged from various quarters as being a corrosive interreligious or ecumenical 'bargain', or perhaps as being insufficiently loyal to one side or the other. To us such criticisms reflect a binary way of thinking that insists people must be either 'pro-Palestinian' or 'pro-Israel'. We espouse a 'pro-people' vision that is both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, although reckoning with various types of power inequities, precisely because dialogue demands that multiple narratives be heard.

Our perspectives flow from our mission to be a 'safe space', a sanctuary of trust where fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes can be exchanged. We believe it is ICCJ's mission to foster such sanctuaries and we invite our national member organizations to continue to pursue this goal through education and dialogue. Although we have made great strides in recent decades in promoting interreligious understanding, in the face of the present deterioration of dialogue due to the lack of political stability in the Middle East, the future requires religious people everywhere to become better and better agents of dialogue.

⁵ See the concluding words of ICCJ, 'Statement on Middle East Crisis', 2 April 2002: 'An end must be made to the damaging abuse of religion to legitimize hatred and violence. The religions must not allow extremists to destroy their manifold possibilities to further civil and peaceful coexistence. It is incumbent upon the religions to lead the way towards peace and justice'.

3. Recent ICCJ Efforts Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

While events in the Middle East have concerned the Executive Board for some time, our most extensive recent comments were composed for ICCJ's 'reassessment of Christian-Jewish relations' that marked the 60th anniversary of the 'Ten Points of Seelisberg'. This process led to the issuance in Berlin in July 2009 of 'A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians'.⁶

After reviewing the different perspectives of Jews and Christians about the religious meaning of the Land of Israel, the 2009 statement concluded with words that we reaffirm:

We believe that interreligious dialogues cannot avoid difficult questions if meaningful and lasting relationships are to develop. Bilateral and trilateral interreligious dialogues can contribute to peace by eliminating caricatures and promoting authentic mutual understanding. Interreligious dialogue can also encourage political leaders to seek the welfare of everyone, and not simply of one's own religious or ethnic group.⁷

An ICCJ international seminar held in Jerusalem in November 2009, 'From Two Narratives to Building a Culture of Peace', further explored these perspectives.

In December 2009 a group of Palestinian Christians issued a statement called, 'Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering'.⁸ This document generated considerable reaction among Christians and Jews in many countries.⁹ 'Kairos Palestine' was extensively discussed during ICCJ's 2010 Annual Meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, particularly in a panel that included one of its signatories. This panel raised new insights for many: one ICCJ veteran commented after the panel that he had arrived prepared to denounce 'Kairos Palestine', but instead left with a greater appreciation of the plight of Palestinian Christians.

After the same Istanbul meeting, the Executive Board published 'a plea to all who seek interreligious understanding' to 'Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words'.¹⁰ We were responding to reactions by some Christian and Jewish organizations that we felt didn't interact with 'Kairos Palestine' seriously or respectfully. Some critics came across as construing any ambiguities in the most negative light, making spurious assertions to delegitimize the document while ignoring some of its profound Christian affirmations. Although the Executive Board posed challenging questions based on strong disagreements with parts of 'Kairos Palestine' (such as its call for Christians everywhere to boycott, sanction, and divest funds from the State of Israel), our main purpose at the time was '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'.

Pursuing our goal to promote interreligious understanding and dialogue, we concluded:

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.

⁶ Available at: <http://www.iccj.org/?id=3595>. In particular see: 'The Twelve Points of Berlin', 4,7,8; and 'The Story of the Transformation of a Relationship', B,5: 'Christian-Jewish Dialogue and the State of Israel'.

⁷ 'The Story of the Transformation of a Relationship', B,5.

⁸ Available at: http://www.iccj.org/redaktion/upload_pdf/JCR/Kairos%20Palestine_En.pdf.

⁹ For a sampling of some reactions, see: <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-todays-dialogue/isrpal>.

¹⁰ Available at: http://www.iccj.org/redaktion/upload_pdf/201011261802000.ICCJ%20-%20Mercy%20Upon%20Words.pdf.

Partially in response to 'Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words', and partially in response to requests from certain Protestant churches in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, some of the contributors to 'Kairos Palestine' kindly hosted a gathering in October 2011 in Beit Jala in the Palestinian Territory with representatives of those churches and Executive Board members and theologians from the ICCJ. In several sessions we discussed Approaches to the Bible, Particularism and Universalism, the Jewishness of Jesus, and the Religious Significance of the Land.

By the end of our conversations, it was clear that the main purpose of the Kairos group was understandably to end the Occupation, the Israeli governance of Palestinian territories, and to seek the assistance of Christians elsewhere in the world in achieving this goal. Some of the Palestinian participants suggested that conversations that did not lead to this political end were wasted time. The European Christians were concerned with the Palestinians' suffering and also committed to combating supersessionist or anti-Jewish theologies. ICCJ saw dialogue as valuable for its own sake and not undertaken to lead to any particular political action. These differences in perspective suggest that everyone should think more intentionally about how their specific contexts shape their perceptions and conclusions.

Since then, a number of increasingly strident documents have been issued by the Kairos Palestine organization or associated groups. Whereas the original 'Kairos Palestine' had offered 'a word of faith, hope and love', a December 2011 statement, 'The Bethlehem Call – Here We Stand, Stand with Us',¹¹ began in a strikingly different tone by instructing readers to 'Read and interpret this text with a Kairos consciousness and gaze of prophetic anger'. More recently, a December 2012 text called 'Kairos Palestine: A Strategy for Life in a Steadfast Way towards Liberation'¹² called 'for the rejection of the idea of a Jewish State of Israel ...' This phrasing can be interpreted in several different ways, including urging the dissolution of the State of Israel as it has been defined since 1948.

ICCJ believes that one-sided or unclear declarations—whether composed by Israelis or Palestinians; by Jews, Christians, or Muslims; by people in the Middle East or elsewhere—provoke only insecurity and fear, and so do not increase the likelihood of peace, either for the Middle East or for interreligious relations elsewhere in the world.

We must also state our conviction that the persistent failure to resolve the issues between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israel and neighbouring states, is increasingly dangerous and untenable. We have no interest in apportioning blame among the many parties who have contributed over the decades to bringing circumstances to their present impasse. There is plenty of blame to go around; no one's hands are clean. We simply long for the end of the current situation.

4. A Growing Urgency

During the discussions of the ICCJ Executive Board in London, there was a general consensus that the status quo is intolerable. We noted several reasons:

- the stateless condition of Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, is unjust.
- the longer the status quo festers, the greater its destructive impact becomes:
 - the likelihood of widespread violence and war increases as whole generations lose hope due to unemployment, lack of opportunity, and feelings of powerlessness;
 - the viability of the 'two state' model becomes less and less credible;

¹¹ Available at: <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/The%20Bethlehem%20call.pdf>.

¹² Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/kairos-palestine/kairos-palestine-a-strategy-for-life-in-a-steadfast-way-towards-liberation/468879139824700>.

- Islamophobic, anti-Christian, and antisemitic rhetoric intensifies around the world, the latter often recycled hoary European Christian themes;
- Israel's self-definition as a Jewish state is increasingly questioned;
- developments that make negotiations increasingly difficult are able to persist or multiply;
- amid growing frustration and impatience, people tend to embrace simplistic or one-sided 'solutions', forsake dialogue, equate whole peoples with the shifting policies of their leaders, and abandon hope.

ICCJ is convinced that despair is not an option. In the words of Bishop Munib A. Younan, the Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem, 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope', which, of course, applies across the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.¹³ We praise all those who labour for reconciliation among people in preparation for the day when politicians and diplomats finally break the current logjam and the Israeli and Palestinian people—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—can at last begin to live normal lives.

5. Putting Discussions of the Middle East into Context

In pondering these things in London, the Executive Board concluded it would be beneficial for ICCJ member organizations to recall some of the lessons we have all learned from the past several decades of interreligious dialogue. To quote from 'A Time for Recommitment':

We are learning to better appreciate the different memories and agendas that Christians and Jews bring to their exchanges. We are convinced that authentic dialogue never seeks to persuade the other of one's own truth claims, but rather to change one's own heart by understanding others on their own terms, to whatever degree possible. In fact, interreligious dialogue in the fullest sense of the term is impossible if any of the parties harbour desires to convert the other.¹⁴

Perhaps the volatile subjects of the Israeli-Palestinian and other Middle East conflicts cause us to forget some of these lessons. What are our 'agendas' when we come together to talk about these topics? Is our aim to 'convert' others to our opinions or to try to understand the bases for their opinions? Are we moved by our own (perhaps unconscious) fears or biases to close ourselves off to critical self-reflection about our own positions? These are the kinds of questions we as people committed to interreligious dialogue could ask ourselves.

We've also learned from dialogue that often people use the same words to mean very different things. In London, we discussed some specific terms that invariably arise when discussing the Middle East: Israel, Holy Land, Zionism, and prophecy. The following comments may be helpful to ICCJ member organizations in their own dialogues, but it should be noted that there are many other relevant words whose multiple meanings could be similarly explored, including justice, peace, reconciliation, and compromise.

Israel

The word 'Israel' has many different meanings. Unless one is alert to its use by a particular speaker or writer, which can often shift quickly according to context, misunderstandings easily arise. Thus, for example, the actions of the government of 'Israel' as a Jewish state are not synonymous with the life of 'Israel' in the sense of the Jewish people around the world. Likewise, no should one presume that Israeli government policies reflect the religious heritage of 'Judaism'.

¹³ Bishop Younan expressed a similar sentiment in *Witnessing for Peace: In Jerusalem and in the World* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 125: '[Reconciliation] is feasible if we believe in a living, reconciling God who can make the seemingly impossible possible'.

¹⁴ 'The Story of the Transformation of a Relationship', B,4.

If one were to start reading the Bible at its beginning in Genesis 1:1, the word 'Israel' first appears in Genesis 32. A mysterious being with whom Jacob has wrestled says to him, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine [or God] and have prevailed'. The sense of 'grappling with God' has great religious significance in Judaism.

One primary meaning of Israel is as the self-designation of the Hebrew and later Jewish people. They are *b'nei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, or *'am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. When the prophet Hosea, speaking in God's voice, says the heartfelt words, 'I fell in love with Israel / When he was still a child / And I have called [him] My son/ Ever since Egypt' (Hosea 11:1, JPS), he is using 'Israel' in this collective sense as the people called into being by God during the Exodus. 'Israel' is used liturgically by Jews today all around the world as referring to their own people everywhere.

However, the sense of 'Israel' as a people is complicated by the beginnings of Christianity within late Second Temple era Judaism. This Jewish origin led to the inclusion of ancient texts in the church's biblical canon that Christians came to call the 'Old Testament'. As a result, Christians understood and still understand many of the Old Testament passages spoken to 'Israel' as directly addressing the members of the church. This is true even when Christians do not hold the supersessionist view that the church has replaced the Jewish people in covenant with God. The words of the Hebrew Bible, except for the commands of the Torah that most Christians see as particular to the Jewish people (*'am Yisrael*), are in some way also addressed to Christians.

In this light, one of the gravest pastoral consequences of the endless Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that Palestinian Christians find it difficult to draw spiritual sustenance from the Old Testament.¹⁵ Understandably, they can react negatively to the enormous number of biblical references to 'Israel' because they associate them with their experiences of the modern Israeli state. Those scriptures—which because they emerged from situations of oppression (e.g., Exodus), despair (e.g., Lamentations) and suffering (e.g., Job), and have over the centuries brought hope to countless distressed people—are tragically unhelpful to many Palestinian Christians. We admire and encourage those Christian pastors who are struggling valiantly against circumstances that promote a kind of modern neo-Marcionism, a very early distortion of Christianity that discarded the Hebrew scriptures.

'Israel' can, of course, also refer to the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*, that region of varying borders in the Bible that lies east of the Mediterranean Sea. Jews see themselves as having a spiritual connection to that Land, and have longed for it in prayer and song during centuries of living in other parts of the world. Traditionally, this was grounded in understandings that complete fulfilment of the biblical commandments was possible only there. Return to the land has been a central element of Jewish messianic expectations.

The Land of Israel as a theological designation of a certain part of the world must be distinguished from the contemporary, non-messianic State of Israel, *Medinat Yisrael*, which came into being as a modern nation-state in 1948 with a particular form of government (a parliamentary democracy defined as a Jewish state with freedom of religion) and with changing borders and jurisdictions over its turbulent 65 years.

Finally, a distinction is needed between the State of Israel and the policies of this or that governing political party in the state. Just as a reporter might say, 'The Hague declared today ...' or 'The word from 10 Downing Street today is that ...', a writer may state, 'Israel believes that ...' They actually mean a specific policy or action and not the entire nation or voting population.

¹⁵ See the relevant comments in Patriarch Michel Sabbah, 'Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible' (1993): http://www.lpi.org/newsite2006/patriarch/pastoral-letters/1993/readingthebible_en.html.

Holy Land

Although originally a Christian expression, this phrase is today employed in varying degrees by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, it became clear in our conversations that each tradition brings very different connotations to this term.

Jewish understanding of *Eretz Yisrael* as holy is related to their self-understanding of their covenantal life with God. In Genesis, the two covenants made with Abram / Abraham and his descendants, both involve inheriting the land (15:18 and 17:17:7-8.) Most of the books in the *Tanakh* have the drama of the relationship between the people and the land (expressed as Israel, Jerusalem, or Zion) as a central theme and not just as a backdrop to the action.

There are specific commandments that are incumbent only in the Land of Israel. The Jewish calendar is based on the cycles of rain and dryness in the land, and to this day, Jews throughout the world base their prayers and festivals around these cycles. In Psalm 137, the worship of the Lord was so intimately bound up with Zion—sacrificial worship in the Temple, the commandments involving agriculture, the life of the Covenant—that Jews exiled in Babylon actually wondered if they could 'sing the Lord's song on foreign soil'.

The Land of Israel has been central to the Jewish narrative for several thousand years. It infuses the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, the *Midrash*, Jewish law, liturgy and philosophy. Jews pray, not only facing Jerusalem, but focusing on it and praying for it. Traditional Jewish views of redemption involve the Ingathering of the Exiles and the Return to the Land.

Christians do not have this kind of covenantal bond to the Land of Israel. Indeed, there is a history of Christian argumentation against such a covenantal bond on the part of Jews. Jews had forfeited any religious connection to the Land, Christians claimed, because of their alleged collective guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus. Those in both the East and West who polemicized against Jews and Judaism argued that God had put all Jews under a curse, evidenced by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the supposed condition of Jews as homeless wanderers.

For Christians, the region has a historical or even sacramental aspect as the place where Jesus was born, ministered, and died, and consequently there is also a history of pilgrimages to pray at these sites. Palestinian Christians have the distinctive self-understanding as being the living witnesses whose church communities have continuously celebrated the events of Jesus' life in the places where they physically occurred. In general, though, Christianity stresses that God can be encountered anywhere, that holiness may be found in any land or place. This universalistic emphasis makes it very difficult for many Christians to resonate with the spiritual significance of the Land of Israel for Jews.

In Islam, Jerusalem has the status of the third holiest city after Mecca and Medina. In fact, at first the direction of prayer for Muslims was towards Jerusalem, but later this was changed to Mecca. The Quran and the Hadith tell how the Prophet Mohammed was miraculously brought to the 'Distant Mosque' (*al-Masjid al-Aqsa*) in Jerusalem, the site of the present-day Dome of the Rock. His 'Nocturnal Journey' (*al-mi'rāj*) continued through increasingly higher celestial states and finally into the Divine Presence. This supernatural journey is held by Muslims to be the model of all spiritual questing.

In concluding this discussion of the different connotations of 'Holy Land', we note that these varying religious attachments provide no answers to today's complex geopolitical and human rights questions that inherently demand compromise.

Zionism

To discuss the wide-ranging connotations of this word, a historical sketch is necessary, however inadequate.

'Zion', the name of a hill in Jerusalem, sometimes functions biblically as a figure of speech for the entire Land of Israel. The term 'Zionism' originated with a secular program to establish a Jewish nation-state in Judaism's ancient homeland. It was part of a wave of nationalist movements in the 19th century in which many different peoples on different continents sought to free themselves of colonialist or imperial domination and achieve self-rule. Judging that antisemitism thoroughly pervaded Europe, the first 'Zionists' saw themselves as exercising the right of self-determination to establish a Jewish state in the biblical land of Israel where Jews could be safe. When, after the First World War, there were vast shifts of populations and entirely new nation-states were carved out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, this seemed increasingly possible. In the wake of the chaos and catastrophe of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the new United Nations voted to set up two states in the region of Palestine, one for Jews and one for Arabs, but in the tumults of the time this division led to war. About three-quarters of a million Palestinians were uprooted from their homes and a similar number of Jews abandoned their homes in the region's predominantly Muslim countries. During the ensuing 'Cold War' competition between superpowers, the wars fought in the Middle East were arguably proxy wars. Peace and stability were never achieved and the Palestinians remain stateless to the present day.

At first many religious Jews opposed the Zionist project. Believing that a return to *Eretz Israel* would happen only in the messianic era at the end of time, they believed that mere human nationalism showed arrogant impatience with God. After the 1967 war, more Israeli and diaspora Jews began to see the founding of the State of Israel as the 'beginning of the flowering of our redemption', as first declared in 1948.¹⁶ The ancient religious longing for *Eretz Israel* became more explicitly linked to the modern nation-state.

Although it developed earlier, increasingly in the 1970s certain Christians from Evangelical traditions voiced a form of Zionism called 'Christian Zionism'. While it has diverse forms, including non-eschatological variants, in general Christian Zionism sees the foundation of the modern State of Israel as an act of God, predicted by the scriptures, and perhaps as the initial stages of the climax of human history. They share some ideas with Jews who read their scriptures so as to see the State of Israel as created by divine intervention.

A very different connotation of 'Zionism' has become widespread in the decades of conflict. This sees Zionism as Western imperialism, colonialism, and ethnic cleansing. Although many states in the region legislatively advantage Islam, international gatherings have at times equated Zionism with racism because of Israel's self-definition as a 'Jewish state'. Some avoid using the word 'Israel' altogether and refer instead to 'the Zionist entity'.

With all these contradictory associations, it is no wonder that using 'Zionism' as a slogan, positively or negatively, has an instant polarizing effect in discussions about the Middle East. The word has become so muddled that some incorrectly assume, for instance, that Zionism is incompatible with the founding of a Palestinian state. We advise member organizations to be particularly alert to how the word 'Zionism' is used, perhaps asking speakers to define what the term means to them so that all can become aware of the wide disparity of meanings that may be operative.

A discussion of Zionism could note some demographic data. Of the roughly 7 billion people in the world, there are about 2 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, and 15-16 million Jews. Many nations have large majority populations of Christians or Muslims—about 20 nations have Muslim populations in excess of 95% of their citizenry. Is it unreasonable for Jews to desire to be a majority in their own state in the land at the heart of their longing for millennia—provided that equal rights of citizenship are legally enforced for non-Jews?

¹⁶ 'Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel', instituted in 1948 by Rabbis Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel and Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, respectively the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Chief Rabbis of Israel.

Prophecy

The words 'prophecy' and 'prophetic' often appear in debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not infrequently for opposite purposes. Some people speak of prophecy in a predictive sense. They may refer to biblical predictions as prophecies about the Hebrew or Jewish people being divinely promised possession of the Land of Israel. Some Christians use the word eschatologically. They speak of an expected 'ingathering' of the scattered Jewish people into their ancient homeland as the first act in an end-times drama culminating with the return of Christ in judgment.

Others stress an ethical responsibility to critique prophetically Israeli governmental policies or actions toward Palestinians. Sometimes this viewpoint is addressed to Jews in terms of *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world, but more often it is expressed as the need for authentic Christians to 'speak truth to [Israeli] power' if they are serious about the prophetic demands of their faith.

We find both ways of invoking the language of prophecy in the context of modern geopolitical debates to be problematic for several reasons. In its Greek roots, the word prophecy means to 'speak on behalf of' God. Biblically, the Hebrew prophets were not primarily predicting events in the distant future, but, as the consciences of the covenant, they insisted that their own contemporaries be more faithful in observing God's commands or else court disaster. In other words, they often criticized the behaviour of their generations from *within* the community of the people of Israel.

In the early centuries of Christian history, church leaders sought to delegitimize Judaism which was held in far greater esteem in Roman society than their new religious movement. Among other arguments, they took the self-critical admonitions of the Hebrew prophets and turned them against Jewish contemporaries as attacks *from the outside* in order to undercut Judaism's superior civic position.

When people today invoke the Hebrew prophets either to justify their criticisms or to validate eschatological speculations, they risk utilizing the scriptures in a self-serving manner that is contrary to the very essence of biblical prophecy. Instead, the prophets should inspire all who consider their words as scripturally authoritative to be humbly *self-critical* before God. In terms of the Middle East, one way to put such prophetic self-criticism into practice would be to ask ourselves: what are *we* doing to promote reconciliation, to promote peace, to bring people together into dialogue and understanding who are divided in the contemporary world?

We have a further reluctance about facile recourse to the biblical prophets. Regardless of the use to which the prophetic writings are put, appealing to them at least implicitly asserts that 'God is on my side' in whatever is being argued politically. Such invocations of God unavoidably sanctify and absolutize conflicting political positions—positions that can be resolved only through compromise and the acceptance by all parties of what seems to them less than ideal.

6. General Perspectives

In addition to the above terminological reflections, the Executive Board also sought consensus on some general principles that it could use to guide its own activities and that might also provide helpful suggestions for ICCJ member organizations.

- A. It seems to us that people who are committed to profound interreligious friendships among Jews, Christians, and Muslims cannot avoid or ignore subjects of great importance, even if volatile. Doing so risks having only superficial relationships.
- B. Conversations about the convoluted Middle East conflicts need to be carefully defined and structured. Is the group interreligious or a single Christian

denomination or Jewish movement? Is the purpose for participants to understand each other's points of view better? Or is it the very different activity of coming to some common statement of views or actions? Dialogues in Israel and the Palestinian Territory, where the conflict has real and tangible immediate effects, will be qualitatively very different from conversations elsewhere.

- C. While we urge continued and open conversation as essential to bringing peace, we also recognize that dialogues that do not consciously reckon with unequal power relationships can actually help preserve inequitable situations. Participants' different positions and feelings of influence or powerlessness need to be understood. For example, Palestinians who have passed through checkpoints to the site of a conversation are in a different social location than Westerners who will be returning to their homes far removed from a situation of occupation.
- D. We believe that any particular proposals for action should be assessed as to whether they will increase feelings of fear or insecurity, or will polarize, or seem to represent only one of the many narratives of the conflicts.
- E. The present, unacceptable situation of Israelis and Palestinians is the result of a complex interplay over decades among regional actors (both governmental and non-governmental) and a series of distant superpowers. Recognising that many parties manipulate unrest for their own ends and propagate self-serving misinformation, we are highly sceptical of simplistic proposals presented as 'the solution'. Only a comprehensive process that establishes normal lives for all parties will be effective and lasting. Such a process must occur in the political and diplomatic realms where it is axiomatic that when legitimate rights clash, compromise is necessary.
- F. We believe that people discussing the Middle East need to recognise the complex history that led to the present situation; be open to hearing multiple narratives; and be aware of the effects of the disproportionality of power and of shifting feelings of being in the minority or majority depending on context. All need to become conscious of at least some of their unconscious biases.
- G. Frequently in dialogue, the crucial factor is not what people say but how they are heard. For example, one speaker may call for an immediate 'end to the Occupation', meaning that Israel should relinquish governance over the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but others may hear this as referring to the pre-1948 situation and construe 'end the Occupation' as a call to eliminate Jewish sovereignty over any part of the land. Patience in bringing to light such miscommunication is an urgent priority.

7. The Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups

In reflecting on these subjects in London, the Executive Board became acutely aware of its own limitations. Religious groups and interreligious groups such as ours will not resolve a conflict that is geopolitical in nature. As frustrating as it is, solutions lie in the purview of governments, diplomats, and political leaders. Yet people of faith can bring to all discussions the energy of radical hope, an enthusiasm which goes beyond what seems likely at any one point in a conflict, believing as they do in a living God.

We should, naturally, urge our respective governments to take steps that promote peace and criticize actions that aggravate the conflict. However, we believe that such political actions should not be couched in self-serving religious appeals, nor based on one-dimensional perspectives that do not reckon with the many legitimate and contradictory rights of the diverse actors in the conflict. These comments, of course, have qualitatively different meanings for those Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel and in what will be the state of Palestine. We believe that all religious persons, wherever they live, should above all promote understanding and reconciliation.

For us, understanding and reconciliation occur through dialogue. Dialogue, by definition, requires an openness to changing our own hearts because of what we have learned from the hearts of our conversation partners. Therefore, we reject current appeals to resist 'normalization' when this means an end to all interaction that might lead to independent Israeli and Palestinian states.¹⁷

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We also know from experience that substantive dialogue demands a willingness to be self-critical, to examine our own consciences, to engage in *heshbon hanefesh*, a reckoning of the soul. Before turning to the positive theological contributions that interreligious groups might make, we should first consider the potential within our respective religious traditions to promote bigotry or intolerance.

As the International Council of Christians and Jews, we urge all Christians to be ever-vigilant about their received legacy of theological anti-Judaism. Attitudes and teachings that prevailed for roughly eighteen centuries cannot be totally eliminated in only a few decades. When we hear some Christians today say that the Jewish claim to be a 'chosen people' shows how overly particularistic Judaism is in comparison with universal Christianity, or when other Christians identify Jesus' primary opponents during his earthly life as 'the Jews', just as 'the Jews' are enemies of Palestinian Christians today, we have to wonder if centuries of anti-Jewish stereotyping and replacement theology are finding new expression in political rather than religious discourse. At least there seems to be a Christian fixation on the Jewish state and its policies, some of which are indeed legitimately questionable.

Israel sometimes seems to be held to standards that other nations are not. As we write this, it is estimated that about 70,000 Syrians have been killed in the conflict there. In Africa, thousands of Christians have been slain in interreligious violence. Yet Christians in faraway places, for instance in Korea, seem more driven to 'repent the sins of Korean Churches that have turned a blind eye to the war of anti-life oppression and violation of human rights that have occurred in Palestine'.¹⁸ Such statements make us ask if the Jewish people—and now also the State of Israel—continue to play an important, even indispensable negative role in Christian theology as the perpetual 'other'.

The same question could be asked of those Christian Zionists who see the return of diaspora Jews to the Land of Israel as the opening of an eschatological drama at the end of which all Jews become Christians or perish. Do such ideas respect Jewish covenantal life in its own spiritual integrity? Are Jews not simply reduced to puppets who act out their assigned role in a triumphant Christian script?

We do not want to be misunderstood. We are making no accusations of antisemitism. We affirm the right of people to question the actions and policies of any government with which they disagree and we acknowledge the injustice of the Palestinians' suffering. We are simply urging Christians everywhere to ask themselves whether they have adequately confronted and reformed the long-lived anti-Jewish theologies that pervaded Christianity, notably but by no means exclusively in Western Christianity, for centuries.

It is all too common that this deplorable legacy is used today by Muslim polemicists who tap into old Western antisemitic rhetoric for political gain today. We urge that Islam's traditional respect for Judaism prevail over such prejudiced and inflammatory practices.

¹⁷ See, for example: <http://www.beyondcompromise.com/tag/anti-normalization>

¹⁸ National Council of Churches in Korea, Korean Christians for Peace in Palestine-Israel, 'Palestinians are not our enemies: they are our brothers!' (November 29, 2012). Available at: <http://www.kairopalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/Statement%20by%20Korean%20Christians%20for%20Peace%20in%20Palestine-Israel.pdf>.

We also urge both Jews and Christians to examine their consciences with regard to their attitudes toward Islam. Too often the ICCJ offices in Heppenheim, Germany, and many member organizations as well, receive materials that try to lump all Muslims collectively together as extremists or terrorists. It might be expected that Christians, who for too long accused Jews of being under a collective divine curse, and Jews, who were on the receiving end of this perennial intolerance, would both be sensitive to manifestations of similar group discrimination directed at Muslims. Polemics that prey upon ignorance and fear are unworthy of religious persons.

Divisiveness is also evident in the attitudes of some Jews who seek to define certain areas or even the entire Jewish state as free of non-Jews, and conversely, the call of some Palestinians to have a state free of Jews. The rise of the “price tag” phenomenon and other physical acts of disrespect for adherents of other religions are deeply disturbing. Such developments only perpetuate intergroup animosity.

We believe that the primary role the 'Abrahamic' religions should play with respect to the Middle East is the promotion of reconciliation and peace among their three traditions. Due to historical memories and the woundedness of all the peoples on the ground there, this is not an easy task. We encourage religious thinkers to enhance the elements in all three traditions that foster mutual esteem and respect, and to pursue what might be called a 'theology of belonging'. This theology, which involves the self-identities of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, would recognize that all three communities 'belong' in the Land that, in different ways, is holy to them. It would be a posture of openness and receptivity to the other two traditions, precisely because we recognize and celebrate our interrelatedness. Even though some political and religious leaders and extremists seek to use conflict and unrest for their own partisan advantage, those pursuing a theology of belonging would be quietly building the interreligious friendships that will come to full flower for the benefit of all on that day when the will to make peace finally triumphs.

8. Invitation to Dialogue

We conclude by repeating our urgent call for everyone committed to interreligious amity, for everyone who cares about the 'Holy Land', not to lose hope. The difficult path of dialogue is the only sure road to reconciliation. We appeal to all Jews, Christians, and Muslims to speak to one another and to be open to one another, setting aside the temptations of polemic, bigotry and stereotype in the service of the peace that we all agree is God's will.

As an international organization fostering Jewish-Christian dialogue and, through our Abrahamic Forum, Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue:

- We in particular invite our member organizations in countries all over the world to continue the work of dialogue. We know that their local interfaith efforts are often shaken by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. People committed to ongoing dialogue can become discouraged by being constantly pressured to 'take sides' on distant issues beyond their knowledge or control. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to ignore or avoid controversy. The way between indifference and resignation, however, is the way ICCJ sees as our common task: to pursue dialogue with open minds, ready to change our opinions when necessary.
- We especially invite and encourage, in solidarity and love, Palestinian Christians and Muslims and Israeli Jews, Christians, and Muslims to even more vigorously pursue the path of dialogue and friendship, as is indeed already unfolding in many places in the region. When the day of peace comes, there should be people ready to live that peace, knowing already how to walk together in the way of peace. The ICCJ is ready to assist in this sacred task and ICCJ board members, living in the region, already have been and will be actively engaged in reconciliation projects.

- We will explore ways to cooperate even more intensively with international Christian ecumenical bodies and appropriate Jewish institutions. In particular in Christian communities all over world the tensions in the Middle East cause difficulties in ecumenical and interreligious relations. The ICCJ is ready to assist in decreasing these tensions and will take whenever possible concrete steps to do so.
- We invite ICCJ member organizations to support actively our members in Israel and their Palestinian partners. The ICCJ and its Israeli members will be glad to cooperate in helping as many people as possible travel to the region to experience the complexity of the situation as seen from all sides of the conflict. The Talmudic sages asked why in the Deuteronomic text, 'Justice, justice you shall pursue' (Dt 14:20) the word 'justice' is mentioned twice?¹⁹ One answer that might be proposed in today's context is: because we have to do justice to both (or all) sides in every situation of conflict.

We pray in this season when Jews celebrate the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and when Christians commemorate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, that it be God's will, *insha'Allah*, that heavenly peace soon embraces all the peoples of the Middle East. Despite the hardships, we believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims must constantly struggle toward reconciliation, relying on God's help to do so because: 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope'.

¹⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 32b.