

EVANGELICALS, ISLAM AND THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Christ at the Check-Point: Theology in the Service of Peace and Justice

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Introduction

In the minds of many Christians, it seems that the vacuum created by the implosion of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism has been filled by the religion of Islam. If the Soviet Union and Communism during the decades of the Cold War were seen as 'Enemy Number One', 'the Great Satan', the most serious threat to the West and the Christian world, Islam has taken their place, because it seems to threaten the peace of the world and want to destroy the state of Israel. If the Jewish people are still the people of God, we are told, and if the state of Israel has a special role in God's economy, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has cosmic proportions, and Christians need to be aware of the serious threats that are posed by Islam. I suspect that this is the wider context in which many evangelical Christians (particularly in the West) will want to think about the Islamic dimensions of this conflict.

1. My own journey in understanding the conflict and Islam

Before I attempt to evaluate the role that Islam plays alongside all the other political factors that are at work in the conflict, I need to tell something of my own story in order to explain how I came to be interested in this conflict and in the world of Islam.

I first went to live and work in Egypt in 1968, a year after the Six-Day War in June 1967. In 1971 during my time in Egypt, I married Anne who had been working as a nurse in Zerqa in Jordan and had lived through the Civil War, Black September, the year before. It was through her that I began to understand what the Palestinian problem was all about.

In 1975 we went to work in Beirut, Lebanon, and arrived there six months after the Lebanese civil war had started. I was working with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students as Regional Secretary for Islamic Lands, trying to develop work among Christian students anywhere between Morocco and Pakistan, and between Turkey and the Sudan.

I very quickly realised that, for many historical reasons, Christians in the Middle East don't always have warm feelings towards Muslims. So it was my work with Christian students which forced me into the academic study of Islam. And this eventually became a major part of my work when I was teaching in seminaries and mission colleges both in the UK and during a further spell in Beirut. It was in these contexts that I wrote *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam*.

As we lived through the civil war in Lebanon, we were constantly trying to work out what the conflict was all about. It soon became obvious that it wasn't a straightforward clash between Muslims and Christians, but that the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon had upset the delicate balance between the different religious communities and drawn in other parties – both regional and international – who then fought it out against each other on the streets of Beirut.

When I was back in the UK during the worst of the conflict, I read some of the books written by evangelical Christians about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and found that they simply didn't make any sense of what I was seeing on the ground in the Middle East. I therefore wrote an article for a Christian monthly magazine outlining my understanding of the conflict and my way of relating the Bible to it. And it was the angry letters of readers in the following months which led to further study and eventually to the publication of *Whose Promised Land?* in 1983.

These then were the contexts in which I have come to be interested both in Islam and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Living between the Middle East and the UK, I've been trying to see the big picture, to make sense of the history and politics, to understand the Islamic dimension of the conflict, and to relate all this to my understanding of scripture and theology.

2. Some starting points for understanding the role of Islam in the conflict

Let me now suggest some basic principles that may help us to separate politics and religion and understand the role of Islam in the conflict.

1. We have to understand the nature of the conflict in its own terms.

The Jewish community in Palestine in 1880 was 5% of the total population and began to grow in numbers and power with the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Europe. The root of the conflict, I suggest, is dispossession – dispossession which resulted from a clash of nationalisms. Two people have been claiming the same piece of land for different reasons, with Jewish nationalism and Palestinian nationalism developing side by side and Jewish nationalism stimulating Palestinian nationalism. It's not a conflict between Judaism and Islam. Since the majority of Palestinians happen to be Muslims, it is inevitable that they turn to their scriptures, their religious beliefs and their history to find the language and the ideology to motivate them to continue the struggle. But the root causes of the conflict are political, not religious.

2. History and politics are important.

When I realized that Christians in the West are generally abysmally ignorant about the history leading up to the establishment of the state of Israel or have only been exposed to one-sided interpretations in Christian literature, I decided to devote the first third of *Whose Promised Land?* to explaining the different stages of the conflict before and after 1948. To underline the point about our ignorance of history and how it affects what is happening even today, it would be interesting to know how many people in

this audience know that in 1953 the CIA and MI6 engineered a coup which brought down the first democratically elected government in Iran under Mossadeq. That coup led to the return of the Shah, and the Shah's dictatorial rule led to the Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. The USA and its allies have made much of the fact that they want to restore democracy in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. But in 1953 it was western interference which brought down a democratically elected government and thus set in motion the whole series of events which has led to the potential crisis that we face over Iran today.

3. Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism is a complex phenomenon and can never be reduced to a simple formula.

It developed in the 20th century partly as a response to three centuries of European imperialism and partly as a response to the decline of Islam in the Muslim world. In resisting the ideologies and cultures of the West, Islamists have wanted to recover the identity and political power of the Muslim world by rediscovering the rich resources of their own religion and history. Islamist Palestinian movements therefore need to be seen in the broader context of a wide variety of nationalist movements which have fought for independence and sought to establish their own national identity. Islamists are impatient with pietistic Islam; they are painfully aware of the economic and political weakness – if not humiliation – of Muslim countries, and they really want to change the world.

4. We need to recognise the diversity of view among Muslims.

There is no single Islamic view about the land and the conflict. Alongside the more strident Islamist voices dominating the media, there are moderate Islamic voices putting forward a much more eirenic approach and challenging the anti-semitism which is often found in Islamist rhetoric. Thus, for example, an Islamic college in Dundee, Scotland, the al-Maktoum Institute, has coined the word 'Islamicjerusalem' (written as one word) for a vision of Jerusalem, based on Islamic scripture and tradition, which recognises its role as a place of blessing for all people and for conflict resolution. And a young British Muslim scholar, Muhammad al-Husseini, believes that it is possible to reconcile Old Testament and Qur'anic teaching about the land: 'Until now there has been no proper dialogue about these founding texts. But a dialogue is possible, first by recognizing that the Qur'an does, in fact, confirm the Biblical promise, then by re-reading the commentaries on the Qur'anic text where the Jewish claim is strengthened. Beyond that, although the Jews come in for severe criticism in the works of Muslim apologists and theologians, there are no grounds in religious law to entertain the conceit that God's promise to the Children of Israel has been broken, and none to support the view that Israel is now the property of the Muslims' (Middle East Quarterly, Fall, 2009, pp 9-14).

5. We need to understand the many other challenges presented to Christians by Islam.

So-called 'Islamic terrorism' has brought the ideological challenge of Islam to the streets of Europe and the USA. And Christians in the West have felt increasingly unsettled by the growing size of Muslim communities in their midst and by their

growing power and demands. Here is a missionary religion, whose numbers are not far behind the total number of Christians in the world, a religion that has much in common with Christian beliefs and yet denies the most fundamental Christian beliefs about Jesus. It's understandable therefore that Christians want to think about the challenge or the threat of Islam in spiritual terms as well as political terms. But it can be very dangerous for us to allow all our fears and prejudices about Muslims which have developed in other western contexts and Islam to colour and distort our understanding of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

3. The scriptural and historical basis for Islamic thinking about the land and the conflict

I believe it is important for us to be aware of this since many in the West are either totally ignorant of the religious basis of the claims made by Muslims or are extremely scornful and dismissive about them. 'They have Mecca and Medina,' we are told, 'So why should they also want Jerusalem and Palestine?' If we are familiar with the scriptural and historical basis for Jewish and Christian thinking about the land, we really need to know and understand the basis for Islamic thinking.

(1) According to Islamic tradition the Prophet Muhammad visited Syria and Palestine during his trading expeditions as a young man. For the first thirteen years of his ministry he and the other Muslims said their prayers facing in the direction of Jerusalem. They also believe that, at a very discouraging time in his ministry in Mecca soon after his first wife Khadijah and his uncle Abu-Talib had died, he experienced the so-called 'Night Journey' (*isra*) in which he was transported during the night on a winged steed (either physically or in a vision) from Mecca to Jerusalem. From here he ascended to heaven and met with former prophets like Abraham, Moses and Jesus (the *mi'raj*). The Night Journey establishes for Muslims a clear link between the Prophet and Jerusalem, and is therefore regarded as an extremely significant event. It demonstrates the continuity between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and proves a kind of spiritual conquest of Jerusalem by Islam. Jerusalem therefore became the first *qiblah* and the third of the holy places (*ulalqiblatain wa thalith al-haramain*). It was conquered by a Muslim army under 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and thus came under Muslim rule in 637, just five years after the death of the Prophet.

(2) There are three clear references to the land in the Qur'an:

a. Speaking about the deliverance of Abraham and Lot, God says about Abraham

'We saved him (Abraham) and Lot [and sent them] to the land We blessed for all people (*al-ard allati barakna lil'alamin*)...' (21:71 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem)

b. Moses encourages the Children of Israel to enter the land with the words:

‘My people, go into the holy land (*al ard al-muqaddassah*) which God has ordained for you – do not turn back or you will be the losers.’ (5:21)

c. Another verse refers to the Prophet’s Night Journey:

‘Glory be to Him who made His servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship (in Mecca) to the furthest place of worship (in Jerusalem), whose surroundings We have blessed (*alladhi barakna hawlahu*), to show him some of Our signs.’ (19:1)

There are therefore good Qur’anic reasons for Muslims to describe the land as ‘the holy land’ and to believe that it has real significance not only for Jews but also for Muslims and for the whole world.

(3) Palestinian Muslims often quote a verse about the first Muslims who were forcibly driven from their homes and inevitably relate this verse to their own experience:

‘Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged – God has the power to help them – those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, “Our Lord is God.”’ (22:39-40).

(4) The early biographies of the Prophet show that he had a very difficult relationship with the three large Jewish tribes in Medina. He probably hoped and expected that they would recognize him as a prophet in the line of the OT prophets and was no doubt disappointed when they refused to recognize him and actively plotted against him, even siding with the pagan Meccans. Some of the harshest verses in the Qur’an are directed towards the Jewish people; for example: ‘You will find the most hostile people to the believers to be the Jews and the polytheists ...’ (3:64; cf 4:155; 5:64; 5:82-83). For centuries Jews and Christians lived relatively peacefully under Islamic rule throughout the Middle East and North Africa as *dhimmis*. But what seems to have happened is that the bad experience of Palestinian Muslims with Zionist immigrants after 1880 has reminded them of Muhammad’s bad experience with the Jews of Medina, encouraging them to apply the harsh verses about Jews in the Qur’an to Israeli Jews today. It must seem to Palestinian Muslims as if Jews of the modern period were simply repeating the hostile behaviour of Jews many centuries earlier towards the Prophet.

(5) There are a number of reported sayings of the Prophet which attach special sanctity to Jerusalem: e.g. ‘Whoever dies in the Jerusalem sanctuary it is as if he has died in heaven.’ ‘Whoever goes on pilgrimage to the Jerusalem sanctuary and worships there in one and the same year will be cleared of his sins.’ In later traditions there are vivid accounts of how the events of Judgement Day will unfold in the city of Jerusalem. Muslims have their eschatologies which are sometimes almost as detailed and graphic as those of many Christians, and Shi’ites have their own distinctive eschatology which revolves around the return of the Hidden Imam.

(6) The land and Jerusalem have played a very significant part in later Islamic history. The Dome of the Rock was built in 691, and the al-Aqsa Mosque around 810. Jerusalem was recaptured from the Crusaders by Saladin in 1187, and Muslim beliefs

about Jerusalem were beautifully summed up in the famous letter which Saladin wrote to Richard the Lionheart in response to his outrageously bold suggestion about power-sharing: 'Jerusalem is ours as much as yours. Indeed it is even more sacred to us than it is to you ...' The late Zaki Badawi comments that 'It was the Crusaders who transformed Jerusalem into a potent symbol of Islam once again.' But the most important point that Muslims want to make is that Palestine and Jerusalem were in Muslim hands for around 1,300 years and under Arab rule for around 900 of those years.

These arguments, based on scripture, tradition and history, influence the thinking of Muslims to a greater or lesser degree. And if we want Muslims to understand and respect what Jews and Christians believe, we have an obligation to understand and respect these views which are so significant for Muslims.

4. The Islamic dimension of the conflict in recent years

Here are some simple observations on the way the Islamic dimension of the conflict has developed in recent years and how it has in some cases encouraged violence.

1. There are strong similarities between Islamic Fundamentalism and Jewish Fundamentalism.

So whenever we speak about 'Islamic Fundamentalism' in this context, we ought at the same time to draw attention to 'Jewish Fundamentalism'. There is little difference in principle between Jews who claim the West Bank for themselves on the basis of God's promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants and Muslims who claim that the whole land is a *waqf*, a sacred trust that has been given to them by God. Here I want to commend the book *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky. We might almost say that Islamic Fundamentalism in the Palestinian context has been a carbon copy of Jewish Fundamentalism.

2. Islamic Fundamentalism or Islamism in the Palestinian context has developed gradually over the years.

The first clashes between Palestinian Arabs and Jews after 1880 had nothing to do with religion; they were the natural response of people who felt threatened by the growing numbers and power of an immigrant community. Organised Muslim opposition to Zionist plans, including a number of calls for *jihad*, began in the 1920s; and the Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Hussayni was one of the leaders of the Arab Revolt in 1936. But the first occasion when any Arab government invoked the doctrine of *jihad* was in 1969 when, following an arson attack by an Australian Christian on the al-Aqsa Mosque, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia called for *jihad* in order to liberate Jerusalem. The PLO Covenant in 1964 said nothing about Islam, and Hamas didn't come into existence until 1987. Its constitution was unashamedly Islamic and quoted many Qur'anic verses. Hizbollah was created in the mid 1980s in the context of Israel's occupation of Southern Lebanon.

3. *All of these developments have to be understood in the context of Israel's illegal occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and Southern Lebanon and its unwillingness to negotiate with the Palestinians.*

In 1994, for example, as part of an attempt to stop the Oslo negotiations, Barukh Goldstein gunned down 23 men and wounded 120 others worshipping in the Mosque at Hebron. In response Hamas launched a series of terrorist attacks. In 1995 Yigal Amir assassinated Rabin – ‘on God’s order’ (in his own words) – because he was seeking to make some kind of peace with the Palestinians. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 in order to destroy the PLO, but failed to achieve this goal. It withdrew to the Litani River in 1985, but kept control of southern Lebanon through the forces of its Lebanese Christian allies. In the words of Arnold Meyer in *Plowshares into Swords: from Zionism to Israel*, Israel’s failure to defeat the PLO in Lebanon ‘quickened the radicalization of the nationalist movement, especially among the younger generation in the refugee camps and their sympathizers, and began to change its dynamic from secular and Marxist to Islamist and fundamentalist’. Could we not say, therefore, that if Israel had complied with the UN Security Council Resolution 242, Hamas would probably never have come into existence? And if Israel has not invaded Lebanon in 1982 and stayed on as an occupying power, there would probably be no Hizbollah today.

4. *Terrorism and suicide bombings.*

Sayyid Qutb was probably the first Islamist leader in the modern period to take the crucial step of declaring that it is legitimate for Muslims to use violence in order to overthrow governments which are unjust or unislamic. Suicide had always been regarded as *haram*, totally forbidden, in Islamic law. But now some Muslims started to believe that suicide *in the context of jihad* could be seen as martyrdom and therefore justified and even commendable.

Acts of terrorism carried out by Palestinians have certainly brought their cause to the attention of the world, but have not brought an end to the occupation. Most observers and many Islamists have finally realized that terrorism has actually played into the hands of Israel because it has provided a pretext for building the Separation Wall and pushed Israelis to elect governments further and further to the right.

5. *The recourse to violence has been an expression of despair.*

If you believe that your own leaders have let you down; if the whole Arab world has let you down; if the EU, the USA and the UN have let you down because they have not resolved the conflict but actually allowed it to get worse, where else do you have to turn? I have to say that I think I can understand what motivates a person to be a suicide bomber. If my situation were intolerable and couldn’t get any worse, and if my religious teachers told me that by blowing myself up and killing some of the enemy in the process I would be guaranteed instant access to Paradise, I might think seriously about going down that road. But then I would have given up hope and given in to despair.

6. *Even the most strongly Islamist groups are capable of genuine pragmatism.*

The Constitution of Hamas and the documents of Hizbollah are uncompromising in the way they state their objectives and the Islamic principles on which they are based. But from my reading of books about these organisations and recent press reports I am sure that there is a strong pragmatic streak in every Islamist leader.

In the context of decades of violence in Northern Ireland, the breakthrough came when the British government stopped talking only with the moderates and started drawing the so-called extremists into the negotiations. It is desperately important that the outside world allows the space and time for Islamist ideology to be softened and modified by pragmatism.

In making these points I am not in any way condoning or justifying terrorism. I am simply trying to understand how this particular expression of Islamism has developed and why it has often turned to violence. Part of the tragedy of the West's response to 9/11 is that instead of stopping to ask 'why are these people so angry, and do they have good reason to be angry?', we have put all our energy into the 'war on terror'. I am convinced that if the West (and especially in the USA) had understood the anger of the Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims and tried to deal with the root causes of this conflict in a more even-handed way, we would have gone a long way towards defusing the anger that is felt towards the West. If we could separate the religious and political issues, and if on reflection we could admit – at first to ourselves and perhaps gradually to others – that at least some of the anger may be justified, then it would be possible for serious and effective dialogue to begin.

Conclusions

1. Our response to this issue has profound implications for our Christian witness to the House of Islam. If this is a *justice* issue, it is also a *gospel* issue. One-sided Christian support for Israel in recent years has become a major stumbling block for the gospel. Many Muslims are not willing to listen to the gospel because they cannot understand how so many Christians are supporting something that seems to them to be so fundamentally unjust.
2. While it is important to understand the religious dimension of the conflict because it affects all the different parties, a political solution can be found only by putting religion on one side and dealing with the fundamental issues in terms of human rights and international law. If religion has become part of the problem, it can be part of the cure, but only when it does three things: (a) enable each party to understand and respect the beliefs of the other parties; (b) help us to discover principles of peacemaking and reconciliation in all religious traditions; and (c) then clear the floor to enable face to face meetings and negotiations to take place between equals on the basis of law.

3. Many who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause in the West fear that the more the Palestinian cause is argued and fought *in Islamic terms*, the more it is likely to lost support from the rest of the world. The stronger the emphasis on Islam, the less empathy they can expect from non-Muslims. In challenging Muslims in this way we are not asking them to give up their Islam. We are simply saying that the Palestinian cause is strong enough to stand on its own as a cause that is based on internationally accepted understandings of human rights. It does not need the underpinning of Islamic ideas in order to be supported in the West, and is likely to be weakened by too close association with Islam.

4. This is a challenge to all Christians – not just Christian Zionists. If some of the presentations at this conference have been presenting a challenge to Christian Zionists, dare I suggest that when we're thinking about *the Islamic dimension* of this conflict, we need to be challenging *all* evangelical Christians and not just Christian Zionists, and eventually not just evangelicals but *all* Christians of *all* kinds. 'Lord, is it I?'

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