

“Torn in Two”

– Responding to the Israel-Palestine Conflict,

An Ecumenical Resource for Discussion and Reflection

Introduction to this Resource

In the face of brutality, conflict and violence we often struggle to find the right way to respond as Christians. Sometime the grief and the anger can overwhelm us. The late Donald Nicholl - former Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem in the 1980s –offers some profound observations from his time in Israel and Palestine. He commented that amidst the conflict:

“If your immediate spontaneous reaction—if the movement of your heart— upon hearing of some tragedy is an ideological one rather than a human one, then your heart has become corrupted, and you should leave straight away and go on pilgrimage until it is cleansed.”

And that, “The task of the Christian is not to be neutral—but to be torn in two.”ⁱ

In this short resource (produced by the Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group), we take the words of Donald Nicholl as our starting point, that as Christians we are not called to be neutral, but to be torn asunder. It is an aid to reflection rather than declaring “a position”, noting that words and utterances can so often be heard differently, can cause pain and anger. In these difficult and painful times, we pray for peace in the Holy Land and pray that we might have the courage to create “brave spaces” to have these important conversations.ⁱⁱ These are the kind of the conversations that are encouraged in “Creating Brave Spaces” published by Interfaith Glasgow.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Context

The Israel Palestine conflict is a highly emotive one and touches us at a deep level. Bishop Kenneth Cragg referred to this land as “competitively loved” and this succinctly expresses many of the underlying issues and emotions that swirl around any discussion or response to this conflict.

Aside from the political conflict itself, there is the veneration of this land as “holy” and an often-bewildering religious pluralism, not only between faiths but within them too. Amidst the struggle for peace, justice and security for all, is also the need to honour, preserve and celebrate this diversity where the Christian Orthodox East and Catholic West meet, where Ashkenazy and Mizrahi Jews come closer than at any time in history, and where Judaism, Islam and Christianity must find the language and means of peaceful co-existence.

For Christians who are external to the situation, it is a considerable challenge to respond to the ongoing conflict: to balance domestic inter faith relations with the strong need to speak out against

violence and to stand in solidarity with Palestinian Churches who look to the world church to speak unequivocally of the urgency for Palestinian self-determination, whilst always recognizing the right of Israel with secure borders

It may also be tempting to equate aspects of this conflict to other struggles - even our own - and it may lead to highly emotional and polarised language. But for the most part this is not our conflict, it is not our war, and it is not our peace and justice that we are seeking after.

In this short resource we are offering some thoughts and suggestions on how Christians might respond to this unimaginable level of violence and brutality. We do so from the perspective of a theological advisory group that has been mandated to offer theological reflection from the perspective of inter-religious dialogue.

However, in situations of extreme violence such as we have witnessed in October and November 2023, silence is not an option. There may also be wisdom in holding back in silence in the first instance before rushing to instant comment. And in responding we need to find a language that is faithful to our Christian vocation to be peacebuilders, seekers after justice, reconcilers, and most of all to show love and compassion to the world as a witness to the self-giving love of God in Christ.

Points for Reflection and/or Discussion

1. This land is not our land, and this conflict is not our conflict. We should therefore approach with humility and with a listening ear. There is a real importance of listening to all the voices of the region especially those with whom we are not at one and which we may find challenging, even disturbing.
2. This is a land that is differently holy to three faiths: it is therefore important to gain an understanding of the different perspectives they have and not read it through our own faith assumptions.
3. The Christian Churches of the region have seen significant decline – in 1970 the Christian population of the Palestinian territories was estimated to be nearly 5%, in 2015 it had shrunk to 1.5%. Therefore, in making public utterances we would plead – do not forget and listen to the Christians (the “Living Stones”) of the Holy Land!
4. It may be wise to resist the temptation to respond instantly, especially on social media, and especially if we don’t have the full facts as catastrophic events unfold. Is there a way of being “actively silent” that we can point to?
5. Comparisons with other conflicts/injustices may not always be accurate or may distort how we view the situation. Does not the conflict narrate its own story(ies)?
6. Wherever we are coming from, and whatever analysis of the conflict to which we are instinctively drawn, our understanding is partial, and our knowledge base is limited. Even those with significant academic expertise or a wealth of direct practical experience, will speak out of a particular perspective that will have its limitations. Our judgements therefore can only be provisional at best. It is therefore important to be open to genuine conversation and to learn from one another.

7. The over-riding importance of compassion, empathy and solidarity for those who are victimized, tortured, injured or bereaved (with particular solidarity with children)
8. How should we understand the relationship between the violence and the wider political and historical context? Whilst the violence certainly has a context, how can we avoid the impression that referring to “context” can inadvertently lessen moral responsibility for these violent crimes and even sometimes appear to excuse it?
9. The Importance of being aware of the impact of history (eg. The involvement of the British) and how history is read differently, is often contested and contextually framed differently. Are we able to recognize that in praying and acting for change in the region, we too may be “part of the problem”? This is true in relation to colonialism but also our inherited language that has often characterized Jews and Muslims in negative terms.
10. In calling out violence it is important to be specific and not partial: statements such as “I/we condemn all violence” may be insufficient, leading to possible misunderstandings that specific condemnations of one side or the other are being avoided.
11. Being conscious that all public utterances will be open to the most forensic scrutiny – even single words that may seem uncontentious may be read or interpreted differently.
12. The Israel-Palestine conflict affects community relations across Britain and Ireland. This includes passionate emotions amongst Christians, Jews and Muslims, which can sometimes result in the loyalty of some communities across Britain or Ireland being questioned, making them vulnerable to hate crime. In some contexts, the different sides of the Holy Land conflict are seen as proxies for sectarian divisions. Thus, we should be vigilant about the language we use and how it might inflame sensitive community relations.
13. Seek to model good methods of reconciliation and humility that do not alienate other faith communities – especially Jews and Muslims – and be vigilant as to the ways this conflict can be weaponized against Jews and Muslims within our own society.
14. Prayerfully reflect on our motivation about public utterances, being ever aware of the risk of what is sometimes called “virtue signalling” and being deliberate that any utterance is grounded in Christian faith and witness.
15. Every perspective on this conflict is contested, and therefore it may be prudent to hear different perspectives on Palestine, Israel and the wider region.

Conclusion

This resource is offered from a distinctly Christian ecumenical perspective from those committed to furthering better relations with people of other faiths. It is offered, knowing that in the midst of terrible conflict, silence is not an option nor should Christians retreat from commenting on the situation because it seems too difficult.

Additional Resources

“Look After One Another: The Safety and Security of our Faith Communities” (Inter Faith Network for the UK) [Looking after one another: the safety and security of our faith communities - Resources - The Inter Faith Network \(IFN\)](#)

“Connected Communities: Churches Responding to Prejudice Against Jews and Judaism” (Council of Christians and Jews and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) [Connected Communities: Churches Responding to Prejudice Against Jews and Judaism \(ctbi.org.uk\)](#)

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism [The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism | JDA](#)

Kairos Palestine [Home \(kairospalestine.ps\)](#)

“Creating Brave Spaces: Learnings from a Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Antisemitism” (Glasgow Interfaith, 2023) https://interfaithglasgow.org/publications/?dm_i=74W9,H9VB,173N54,266PK,1

“A Jewish-Christian Glossary” (Church of Scotland/Office of the Chief Rabbi) https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/94361/christian-jewish-glossary_abridged_v2.pdf

For Further Reading

Clare Amos, *Peace-ing Together Jerusalem*, WCC 2014

Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine*, Lion 1983, 2002

David J. Goldberg, *This is Not the Way: Jews, Judaism and Israel*, Faber and Faber, 2012

Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*, IVP 2020

Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Fortress Press 1995

Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes*, Orbis Books 2014

Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*, Scribe Publications 2014

Michael Stanislawski, *Zionism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017

Munib Younan, *Our Shared Witness: A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation*, Lutheran University Press 2012

ⁱ quoted in Clare Amos: “Peace-ing Together Jerusalem” (WCC 2014).

ⁱⁱ “Brave Spaces”, as used in the untitled poem by Beth Strano <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/untitled-poem-beth-strano>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://interfaithglasgow.org/publications/?dm_i=74W9,H9VB,173N54,266PK,1