

British Churches and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, 19 September 2009

Concordis International facilitated a consultation on 19 September 2009 entitled 'British Churches and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict'. Participants attended in their personal capacities and came from a range of backgrounds, including church leadership, academic theology and involvement on a practical level in peace-building or advocacy in the Middle East.

The essence of the consultation related to the different traditions and theological standpoints within British churches and how they lead to variations in attitudes to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. These different positions have an impact on the engagement of British Christians with Israelis and Palestinians. Within a broad spectrum there exists a range of opinion, but reasoned communication is often lacking. However, Christians from different ends of this spectrum share more theological common ground than often is recognised. Indeed, the notion that 'God has not finished with the Jewish people' was understood to be entirely compatible with God's loving, just and compassionate character and also with His plans for other groups of people.

It is important that Christians both engage with biblical texts regarding the role of Israel in God's plans and that they have a theology on God's relationship with Palestinians. Any theological perspective, whether regarding Israel or Palestine, must recognise a number of central beliefs which are fundamental to Christianity:



Photo: Florian Seiffert

- ◇ We are all created in the image of God and therefore all people have an innate dignity.
- ◇ God's knowledge of us goes deeper than our respective ethnicities.
- ◇ God loves justice.
- ◇ The Land is ultimately the Lord's.
- ◇ Blessed are the peacemakers.
- ◇ The Christian call is to do to others as we would have them do to us and this includes forgiving even our enemies.

These principles need to be at the centre of any view or theory of the role of Israel in God's plans.

One suggestion for those in dialogue on the Israel-Palestine conflict was that portrayals of each 'side' should always be based on the very best examples – comparing 'best with best' – and not resort to caricatures of positions in order to win the debate.

Finally, dialogue between Christians in the UK on this subject was broadly acknowledged to be important, and this consultation was seen as a significant step in such a process. This should not mean pretending that differences in viewpoints do not exist, but rather involves sharing varying perspectives from a position of respect and humility, and doing so accurately. The dialogue was concluded by the participants to be valuable and enriching, both spiritually and practically. Not only does it help us to 'do no harm' as independent actors through giving us more nuanced and well informed views, but it also opens up the possibility of collaborative action across a variety of groups in the future. Dialogue is therefore an important aspect of being able to address what was perceived throughout the consultation to be the 'elephant in the room' in Christian discourse in the UK: theological division and its consequences for constructive engagement by British Christians in the seemingly intractable Middle East conflict.

CURRENT BARRIERS TO PEACE

- ◇ Continued building of Israeli settlements
- ◇ The Palestinian refugee issue
- ◇ Final status of Jerusalem
- ◇ Water resources
- ◇ The recognition of the state of Israel by Arab nations
- ◇ Disillusionment on both the Palestinian and Israeli side regarding their current situation and peace processes
- ◇ The role of Hamas
- ◇ The growing militancy and religiously radical nature of certain Israeli groups, and the right wing nature of the Israeli government
- ◇ The rise of non-state actors, complicating the situation