Reckoning with Israel: Thorny issue for mainline churches

by Chris Herlinger in the May 22, 2002 issue

When a delegation of U.S. Protestant and Orthodox representatives returned in late April from a visit to the Middle East, they immediately issued a statement “equally and unequivocally” condemning the suicide bombings against Israelis and “the violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.” Both types of violence, the Christian leaders said, were “counterproductive to achieving peace with justice.” The statement went on to outline “a just resolution” that would include “secure borders” for Israel and an end to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

To Robert Edgar, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches and one of the leaders of the delegation, it was an evenhanded statement—the type that the NCC and other Protestant and Orthodox denominations have been issuing for more than 20 years. But Edgar knew the statement would land the NCC once again in trouble with U.S. Jewish leaders.

“The Jewish community is highly sensitive to any word or to any language that implies wrongdoing on the part of Israel,” Edgar acknowledged, but said he hoped it was clear that he and others wanted to be evenhanded in their analysis to counter the “partial blindness” on all sides of the issue—the inability or unwillingness by Israelis, Palestinians and their respective supporters in the U.S. to see the injustice experienced by those on the other side.

The NCC statement was indeed criticized by Jewish leaders, who said the NCC continued to be blind to the realities faced by Israel. Eugene Korn, the Anti-Defamation League’s director for interfaith affairs, for example, said the statement displayed “moral fuzziness” by equating the Palestinian and Israeli situations, and he said the issue of suicide bombers was “treated as if in a parenthetic way.”

The NCC delegation, said Korn, “lumped everything under violence, but terrorism is something very specific, belonging to its own category.” Korn called the NCC declaration a “distortion of the overall picture,” and said it displayed “a deep lack of

sensitivity and understanding to the situation Israel finds itself in."

Shouting matches about Israel and the Palestinians have not been uncommon when mainline Protestant and Jewish representatives have met in recent years, and there are likely to be more in the coming months. "I hate it," said Jay Rock, who directs the NCC's interfaith efforts. "The terms have all become loaded."

But what are the terms? Edgar and other mainline church leaders believe their positions have been fair because they have been grounded in a need for justice for both Israelis and Palestinians. Jewish leaders like Korn, meanwhile, have said that mainline Protestants display clear partisanship for the Palestinian cause. "Peace and justice implies fairness and balance, and that's precisely what we'd like to see, but there is no effort to hear the Israeli position," he said.

The disagreement over what constitutes "balance" stretches back decades. For much of the 1950s, support for Israel was an article of faith for mainline Protestants. Reinhold Niebuhr was among the leaders whose support for Israel was well known and often heralded by Jewish leaders.

But by the 1960s changes were under way, shaped partly by new perceptions of mission within the denominations that had a strong missionary tradition in the region, most notably among the Presbyterian, Episcopalian (Anglican), Methodist, Congregationalist and Reformed churches. Missionaries began seeing their role less as "spreaders of the gospel" and more as supporters of the churches and communities they served.

Meanwhile, the worldwide decolonization movement, the rise of liberation theology and the increasing call for "mutuality" between Western and Middle East Christians began to alter U.S. Christians' perceptions of their relationship with the region. So, too, did increased ecumenical dialogue between Western and Orthodox Christians and the creation, in 1974, of the Middle East Council of Churches, which gave new prominence and voice to the churches in the region.

J. Richard Butler, the onetime director of Church World Service, worked in what was then the Jordanian sector of Jerusalem from 1960 to '67, assisting those who were then called "Arab" refugees. Among Americans who, like him, had worked in the region, there emerged a growing awareness of the plight of Palestinians and increased personal contact with Palestinian Christians. That gave them, Butler said, a different outlook.

A trip to the region in 1969 by a group of religion reporters revealed some of the growing divisions in the church. The journalists reported on meeting Palestinian representatives and visiting Palestinian refugee camps. One of the articles that appeared in *Christianity* & *Crisis* so angered Niebuhr's wife, Ursula, that she asked that her husband's name be taken off the magazine's masthead.

Another important moment came in the late 1970s when the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, civil rights leader Andrew Young, met with a representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization. That controversial meeting cost Young his position but it had the effect, Butler said, of sowing doubts among some black American Christians about the direction of U.S. Middle East policy.

Something of a climax to this era came in 1980, when the NCC issued a statement on the Middle East which caused an uproar and even precipitated bomb threats against the NCC. Reading the document 22 years later, one finds it hard not to be struck by its measured tone and its earnest "on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand" voice. In its specific recommendations, the document reads like a statement Edgar and his delegation could have just drafted: cessation of violence on all sides; mutual recognition; international guarantees of borders; agreement on the future status of Jerusalem.

Some would say the NCC and mainline denominations have been too keen on "balance," and that they need to take a more unequivocal stand in support of the Palestinians and go even further against the grain of widespread public support for Israel. One U.S. ecumenical officer said the issue comes down both to a sense of justice and a debate over the "controlling narrative" of the crisis. "Who do you see as victim and who do you see as victimizer? You have two interpretations of history and two senses of rectitude."

Some mainline leaders, such as Frank Griswold, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, have been particularly outspoken in calling for Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian areas.

Khader El-Yateem, a Palestinian pastor of an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in Brooklyn, praises the official mainline position on the issue but also believes the churches have not been sufficiently prominent at higher levels—such as lobbying in Washington—for their position to be heard.

“The churches have not done enough,” he said. “We are issuing statements every day, but we don’t know who reads them or how much weight they carry.”

The lobbying at the national level is an issue about which El-Yateem and other Palestinian and Arab Christians in the U.S. are passionate because they believe their tax dollars are being used for a Middle East policy they cannot condone. “These are our brothers and sisters who are being killed,” he said.

Asked what he thought would be a fair and balanced policy for the U.S. to pursue, El-Yateem said: “I want to be pro-justice, and that means opposing violence against both Israelis and Palestinians. But for that to happen means one thing: supporting the end of the [Israeli] occupation. The moment you end occupation, you will end the violence.”

Others in mainline Protestant churches disagree on the issue of the occupation and feel the statements of Edgar, Griswold and other church leaders do not represent those in the pews. Recently an “Episcopal-Jewish Alliance for Israel” was formed in Massachusetts to counter what a group of Episcopalians in that state believe are unfair condemnations of Israel by Episcopal leaders. Some 150 Episcopalians signed a statement of support for Israel and have declared that the “fundamental cause of the conflict in the Middle East is the Arab refusal to accept the reality of a non-Muslim state in the region.”

Conservative-evangelical Protestants have long supported Israel. This Jewish-evangelical alliance has puzzled some mainline observers, who suspect the alliance is purely political and will eventually unravel given that one of the parties is theologically committed to converting the other.

However that relationship plays out, it is impossible to discuss relations of Christians and Jews without confronting the pernicious legacy of Christian anti-Semitism. Korn emphasized that he did not believe criticism of Israeli policy of the sort made by the NCC and other religious leaders was anti-Semitic. “Certainly there can be criticisms of Israel if they are fair,” he said.

But Rabbi James Rudin, the interreligious adviser at the American Jewish Committee, provided a different answer, saying that while he would use the term anti-Semitism “very sparingly,” he believes there is in the mainline Protestant world a kind of double standard that has celebrated “nationalisms” and “Third World-isms” but has not celebrated Israel. “They have not rejoiced for Israel and I would welcome a bit of

celebration, that affirms Israel with a little joy."

Rudin also believes there may be a kind of discomfort—however subtle—in the mainline Protestant world with a powerful Israel. There are those, he said, who can see Jews "as refugees, as the minority, as the family doctor. But Jews with power—that's an unknown for most Christians," he said. "Jews with power in the Middle East—that is, subliminally if not openly, a challenge to Christian theology."

Both Korn and Rudin said they would welcome more dialogue with U.S. Christians but acknowledge that in the present environment that is not happening. "It's a very emotionally and potentially explosive issue," Korn said. "But there are moderate and pragmatic Jewish people who are sensitive to justice issues and would welcome a calmer debate."

Protestants say they would welcome such dialogue, too, but some feel constrained given the complex dynamics and relationships the issue presents. "I've dealt with it by keeping quiet," admitted one ecumenical leader, saying he had not wanted to "wade through the quagmire" of arguments about whether those critical of Israeli policy are friends of radical Palestinians.

Some Protestants and Orthodox say the only "balance" Jewish leaders want from U.S. Christians is wholehearted support for Israel. Some also say privately that they feel the specter of anti-Semitism will be raised if they make any criticism either of Israel or of American media coverage of the Middle East (which, they argue, has resulted in a skewed version of how the Middle East is perceived in the U.S.).

"The ecumenical consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict pretty much reflects the broad international consensus, based on United Nations resolutions and international law, combined with its own understanding of prophetic justice," said David Weaver, former NCC Middle East director. "Regrettably, it's Israel and its U.S. backers that are out of step, and not at all the ecumenical community or the mainline Protestant churches."

Balance and justice are probably the words most often heard in these debates. Far less heard is the word empathy.

"What I miss are the voices of justice on either side that acknowledge the other's suffering," said Donald Shriver, president emeritus of Union Theological Seminary and a longtime participant in the Christian-Jewish dialogue. "I can't help but yearn for that."