

Reconciliation and the Holy Land

YAZEED SAID

How can the churches work for peace and reconciliation on the Holy Land? In this article Yazeed Said poses some tough questions for all of us to answer.

There have been few moments in the history of the land we call holy that have been less hungry for a hopeful future than today. The land's mercurial possibilities and its hope for change have, across the years, shaped people's rhetoric. The history of bloodshed, of dramatic tragedy, seems to be part of the land's own destiny, as we have frequently been reminded. Yet the way the land lurches from one unaddressed crisis to the next is perhaps a large part of the reason for the attraction it carries for many: politicians, religious leaders, and media personnel.

On the other hand, this in itself can nurture a sense of pessimism as well. Nothing will change, many say. 'As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be' is the dictum of passive reaction. But does this mean that we can do nothing about it? Its frequent crises throughout history have not made this land in any way lose the affection of people worldwide. Yet part of the

complexity of the crisis is that many of those who live in the land, remember its past as if it were a more glorious period. For them, the land has become a relict of a previous age; its wrinkled space, over which many fight, looks more the result of fruitlessness than purity.

Reconcilers... fighting for space

Those who feel they are part of its mess are either unable to do much and succumb to a sense of helplessness, or they claim to have the answer to its problems, and actively begin to pursue what they feel to be the true path for peace. Yet soon they discover that their proactive attempts to work for a solution only add to the many layers of

the author

Revd Yazeed Said is a Palestinian Christian and an Anglican priest. Originally from Galilee, he has also worked in Jerusalem. He is currently studying for a PhD at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, specializing in the history of Christian-Muslim relations.

“The land lurches from one unaddressed crisis to the next. [This] is perhaps a large part of the reason for the attraction it carries for many: politicians, religious leaders and media personnel”

‘fighting for space’. In turn this shows how controversial the assertion of ‘reconciliation’ is, when reflected upon simply by those who are unable to draw in a voice that is ‘from above’, a voice able to read, affirm, and relate to the many complexities of the conflict. Many who speak of reconciliation today in the holy land, have an exhausted impatience about them. They think they have the answer and regard reconciliation almost as the expression of a quick, magical solution, cutting through a labyrinth of tact.

The complexity of the situation in the Holy Land is not an easy matter to explain, even for those, like myself who are natives of that land. One thing is true, and is testified to by many, that the longer you live in the land the more it becomes clear how the biblical drama tunes in with the struggles of the land up till the present day. I do not wish to claim an ability to comprehend the divine drama. It is indeed confusing, especially if we draw analogies to the ongoing conflicts in the land. One can certainly write dramas, and soap operas, out of many stories of daily life there!

Even the Church itself, (that includes all of us), is part of the dilemma, especially when it fails to see Christ outside its normal structures and accepted norms, and ends up being just another body fighting for space among many others.

The indigenous Christian community in the land has always been eager to encourage the wider Church throughout the world to become more aware of its reality and story. This concern is, in the first instance, due to the fact that the Church in Jerusalem is not a modern phenomenon, but has been in existence since the inception of the first Christian community. This is important and comes as something of a surprise to many Western Christians who are understandably ignorant of this reality. However, the Christian community is also part of the larger Palestinian community that is in conflict with Israel.

The good for all

The historical narrative of the last fifty or sixty years of political conflict is not my main interest here in this short article. I am not seeking here to examine

history as historians claim to do, to produce ‘a strong sense of particularities of societies... of the exact historical circumstances which they are hoping to understand and to analyze’.¹ But what is important for us is how this historical conflict poses for us certain theological challenges that relate to the realms of history and politics, especially given that reconciliation is the main focus and aim of this article. These do not simply affect Christians. We need to remember that the Christian understanding of reconciliation has to present itself as part of a bigger picture; for this bigger picture carries a bigger meaning for all concerned. That which is good for the local Christian community of Palestine depends on the good of the whole community, Palestinian and Israeli alike.

Bearing this in mind, the peoples of the holy land today, of Palestine and Israel can, as is the case with most political conflicts, be divided into two parts. On the Palestinian side, as we are already aware, there is a real concern to share a story of military oppression, occupation, and humiliation. When you visit the West Bank today, what strikes you most is the physical impact of the occupation: the rows of identical houses in the settlements, the bulldozing of olive groves, the bypass roads that connect settlements to Israel, and the growing separation wall. A local Palestinian Christian adds:

Most of these hills had never been smitten by the curse of machines. They had remained more or less unchanged since the time of the Prophets. But, now it has changed. The earth was turned over, sliced, cut and reconstructed. The terracing disappeared, and in its place wide expanses of flat land were created on which ready-made houses would be perched.²

This is only a backdrop for what is happening. Lawlessness, oppression practised in the name of military necessities, and security, are simply part of life’s daily humiliations for the whole Palestinian community. The Christians among this community are also directly affected, and as they have normally sought to find a viable way of life, and good education, whenever an opportunity arises for them to leave, understandably they make sure not to miss it. This is one reason for the apparent decrease in number of the Christian community. In 1967, there were reports of about 30,000 Christians living in Jerusalem. Today the most generous calculation is that you will find 8000. At the beginning of the Intifada in 2000, many families left the Bethlehem area, perhaps as many as 80 families in the first six months. Among those who remained, unemployment increased, and the



The 'Hafrada' or separation wall in Israel/Palestine (USPG/Janina Zhang)

death toll rose. Among those killed was the young Johnny Thaljiyyeh, who happened to walk out of the Church of Nativity one day at the wrong moment, and through no fault of his own was shot by an Israeli soldier. He was not the only one.

These matters are mentioned above, not because I am cherishing the opportunity to show how 'pitiable' the Palestinian community is. There are certain things that one finds difficult to forget, indeed, it would be immoral to forget. But, the question is: what do we do with this memory? How do we relate to this tragedy? If I were to go as a priest to these families who have been through such tragedy, and who have

experienced the pain of loss caused by an enemy, and were to say to them we are called to *reconcile* ourselves with the same enemy, I would probably be acting very inexpediently. In this context, and from this side of the conflict, to talk about reconciliation would seem to those concerned to be a way of denying their story, their suffering, and their right to react to the injustice done to them. This remains true even today when we hear of possible change that may open up some different paths. When the opportunity arises for change, one should grasp it unhesitatingly. Yet, from the reports of stories on the ground, in reality there seems to be little change at all.

“A Church that does not proclaim a shared repentance, and which is not willing to be self-critical, is not worthy of proclaiming reconciliation.”

The healing of memories

The question is again what do we do with this memory? Do we simply romanticize the religious community to which we belong, and the victimization of the powerless in the conflict? It is easy to become too sentimental about stories of suffering. This question is one which in the first instance is directed to the Church, which claims to bear the ministry of reconciliation. For if the Church in the Holy Land always expects the worldwide community of Christians to be surprised by the atrocities committed against her own local community, it becomes incumbent upon the Church itself to be ‘surprised’ by the reality of others in the locality outside the Church community, and to be challenged about the inadequacy of the way she sometimes relates to her own community. A Church that does not proclaim a shared repentance, and which is not willing to be self-critical, is not worthy of proclaiming reconciliation.

Therefore, it is obligatory upon local Christians that we relate to the reality of the other side: the Israeli community.

It is only when we are committed to listening, that we are able to express something more than a critique of political injustice. And that is where true freedom is. The sense of fear on Israel’s side, however much some people may seek to reason it away, has to be taken seriously. This sense of fear is clearly expressed in the all too prevalent media pictures of suicide bombs, and shattered bodies. Just as mothers have innocent lost children in Palestine, who have been killed due to the terror of the state, mothers have also lost innocent children in Israel due to the terror of the oppressed.

However, to add to the level of complexity, it is also clear that a community which is both militarily well equipped, and at the same time lives in fear, finds itself reacting to this fear in military language. Therefore, this community feels that what they need is a firm government that can control and impose order on the other. This attitude does not help the Israeli community easily to accept the concept of reconciliation. For the Israeli community, when bombs explode in

the streets reconciliation seems to mean simple-mindedness, and conceding to the terror of the oppressed. At the very least it is regarded as a naïve reaction. This has been clearly voiced by many Israeli politicians up till the present. Therefore, even now, when there is a higher level of cooperation between the two sides of the conflict, the main focus remains, publicly at least, on discussions about security. It does not go beyond that. But the problem is that military solutions do not give real solutions.

Justice and responsibility

The answer to both these competing perspectives does not lie in any alien philosophy. It can be found in the traditional resources of the communities of the land. Recently, as I was sharing some reflections on the matter with a Church community, I was struck by the question, which reminded me of the good old Arab tradition of *sulha*, which in English means literally ‘reconciliation’. Therein lies something of a revealing answer. When two clans are in conflict for whatever reason, it is customary that the clan of the aggressors pays a visit, represented by its dignitaries, to the clan of those who had been attacked. In this meeting, mutual respect is expressed, and a request for reconciliation is presented, in such a way that does not negate the honour of

any of the two parties concerned. This ‘ritual’ in Arabic is called *sulha*.

This concept of reconciliation, already embedded in the local tradition of the community, reflects back a kind of understanding of justice, *adala* in Arabic, which is not the same as the often accepted meaning of justice as simple ‘equality’. A contemporary Islamic scholar defines this concept as ‘the normative equity not of equality or equivalence, but of optimal proportionality among the unequal and uneven of a composite.’³

The clans coming together do not deny their difference, but at the same time express mutual and shared responsibility. This is an understanding of justice that reveals something taken for granted when defining it simply as ‘equality’. The sense of shared respect, with shared responsibility, makes all the difference.

I would suggest that there is something of the gospel in all of this. Indeed, as far as I can see it is wholly biblical. When God in the Old Testament is angry with the land, as in Hosea 1-2, God is still referred to as the one who loves the land, and as a result he is in pain because of his love, despite the idolatry prevalent. God always seems to take an initiative that shows that his ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. Hosea is asked to love his adulteress

wife, as the Lord loves the Israelites, who worship other gods.⁴

Something of Jesus' inducement to walk the extra mile may be heard here too. This is not about being passive, it is about being active in a vastly and deeply different manner, a manner that challenges the accepted and expected way of reaction to any wrong that one faces, because at the heart of all we do, we are called to be attentive to the reality of the other, and ensure that we still can express together a shared responsibility towards each other's reality before God.

This in turn tells us that what is so badly needed is a kind of leadership that is able to help the communities of the land grow beyond fear, and beyond our own self-referential interests, acknowledging our belonging together. But, for this kind of leadership to start making any difference, it will need to remember that it may not necessarily have the answer to everything. It stands to lead in silence, as it were; for once it

claims to have the answer, it ends up being just another voice among competing voices, and defeats the cause which brought it into existence. However if it takes seriously both its capacity to listen, and relate seriously to the concerns of its people, it can lead them forward, infusing in the community a greater capacity to learn about the other.

All of this does not necessarily help us come to an easy conclusion. On the one hand, we have the force of the argument that the tradition of the community is inherent with a sense of reconciliation that only needs to be rediscovered, and shared. But, on the other hand, it remains a vastly challenging task that requires an element of bearing one's cross, and looking foolish in the world where the only language acceptable seems to be that of self-defence. But, it may be that we are called to be foolish. The cross is indeed a stumbling block. That is the extent of our calling, and nothing less.

Notes:

¹Cannadine, D and Price, S, *Ritual of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 6.

²Shehade R, *Strangers in the House: Coming of age in occupied Palestine*, Profile Books, London, 2002.

³Azmeh, A, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Politics*. I.B. Tauris, London, 2001, p. 128.

⁴Hosea 3.1.