



Interfaith Relations Newsletter

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Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

Thinking Together

A new paradigm in the methodology of Christian theologizing is now emerging. We are learning the value of subjecting our theologies to the testing, refining and sharpening that comes from the engagement of competent colleagues from other religious traditions. "Thinking Together," a WCC sponsored consultation of 15-20 scholars and leaders from a several religious traditions, engages in this cutting-edge process. Having met together at least once a year for the past six years, we have already completed two projects on Religion and Violence and the Theology of the Other and are currently working on the question of Conversion.

Christian Theology's unwillingness, thus far, to engage colleagues from other religious communities in its process of theologizing has led to an unacceptable insularity.

For instance: in his influential 1913 book *The Crown of Hinduism*, J.N. Farquhar suggested that just as Jesus had come to fulfill the "law and the prophets" of his Jewish tradition, he fulfills Hinduism as well. He wanted to lift the Christian perceptions of Hinduism to the level of Judaism. While his supercessionist theology may have seemed progressive in his day, we have given up on that theological paradigm. Our Jewish and Hindu colleagues have told us of its offensiveness.



Dr. Hans Ucko (WCC) who convenes the Thinking Together group spoke at an Interfaith Prayer Service at Gandhi Museum grounds in Madurai, India. The group's meetings were held here and at the Shanti Ashram in Coimbatore. In the foreground is Dr. S. Jeyapragasam, the director of the Gandhi Museum and one of our hosts.

C.F. Andrews, one of India's beloved missionaries and Mahatma Gandhi's friend advocated an incarnational theology where he sought Jesus in the Indian context. He once said that in the Hindu scripture, he finds passages of such deep spiritual beauty and moral insight as to say "This is nothing else than Christian." The problem of course, is that it is not Christian. And the need to call it Christian in order to assign it high value is offensive to Hindu ears.

Similarly, in 1968, an unfortunate title given to Catholic theologian Raimon Panikkar's excellent book. *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* received harsh criticism from the Hindu

community for presuming that the Hindu tradition needed a Christ, known or unknown.

My point is this: we know that both Andrews and Panikkar had deep relationships with Hindus, and Farquhar too likely did. But since the methodological model for Christian theologizing precluded the participation anyone other than Christians, none of them had the advantage of being forewarned of the offensiveness of their theological language.

Our relationship with Jews is another case in point. *Nostra Aetate*, the Roman Catholic document issued 40 years ago, called for a reevaluation of Christian attitudes towards Jews. Several Protestant denominations followed with similar gestures. Many have now abandoned their supercessionist beliefs about Judaism, proscribed the charging of deicide against Jews and for the most part given up on their desire to convert them. Christians are also becoming aware that the anti-Jewish bias in Christianity is not tangential but intrinsic to its tradition.

These changes happened only because Jews and Christians began to build relationships and Christians began to notice how deeply hurtful and damaging some of their theological and hermeneutical traditions have been.

But hear my point again: despite strong relationships with Jews, anti-Jewish theologies and hermeneutics still abound. Fifty years after the holocaust, the narratives of Holy Week are still dramatized by liturgies, hymns, passion plays, scriptures and sermons that blame Jews for the death of Jesus. We will not get beyond such theological atrocities unless our theological table engages Jewish colleague to help test, refine and sharpen our theological and biblical interpretation.

Each member of the Thinking Together group, deeply rooted in his/her religious tradition, writes from that perspective. The difference is that from the initial discussion to the final publication, each paper is subject to the robust peer review of colleagues from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim traditions. Thinking Together, I believe, is the cutting edge experiment that will lead to a methodological shift in Christian theologizing and to a similar shift in the theological/philosophical traditions of other religions.

Interfaith Relations Commission Updates

Forgiveness and Reconciliation Panels at the Congress on World Religions After 911

The Interfaith Relations Commission hosted two panels at the Montreal Congress. In the first, four panelists from Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Historic Black Church and United Church of Christ traditions spoke about their church's understanding of Forgiveness and Reconciliation. In the second, Jewish, Hindu,



Dr. Manohar Singh Grewal, President of the World Sikh Association — America Region, addresses the gathering.

Muslim and Sikh panelists addressed it from the perspective of their traditions. At a time in our history when much violence in the world is perpetrated in the name of religion, the religious values of Forgiveness and Reconciliation, we hoped, would provide a welcome alternative for relating to human community. The papers, however were in no

way uniform. Some disagreed that Forgiveness and Reconciliation are even possible. A discussion on this question has now begun. To read the papers, please visit: www.nccusa.org/interfaith. If you wish to participate in an online discussion of this topic, send us an email requesting authorization to: shanta@nccusa.org.

Key Initiatives: 1. Christian Zionism

Responding to a letter from four of the highest ranking Christian leaders of Jerusalem, the Commission issued a statement of concern about the rising popularity of the modern Christian theological and political movement commonly called Christian Zionism. We brought this to the attention of the NCC member communions via the Governing Board, noting that this particular brand of apocalyptic theology adversely affects:

- ◆ justice and peace in the Middle East, delaying the day when Israelis and Palestinians can live within secure borders
- ◆ the lives and livelihoods of Middle Eastern Christians
- ◆ relationships with Jews, since Jews are seen as mere pawns in an eschatological scheme
- ◆ relationship with Muslims since it ignores their rights
- ◆ interfaith dialogue, since it views the world in starkly dichotomous terms.

Rev. John Hubers of the Reformed Church in America who has put together the website www.christianzionism.org and is organizing an Institute for the Study of Christian Zionism, spoke at our meeting, helping us clarify many questions. Robert O. Smith the Lutheran Campus Minister at University of Chicago and co-author of *Christians and a Land Called Holy* served as a resource person for a forum at the NCC General Assembly entitled "Apocalyptic Theology and its Impact on the Middle East. His article on the subject appears on the opposite page. In addition, NCC President, The Rev. Michael Livingston will convene a task force to study the question and report at the next fall meeting of the Governing Board of the NCC.

Key Initiative 2: 400th Anniversary of the Founding of Jamestown

In response to an overture brought to us by the Virginia Council of Churches, the Commission said: The events of 1607 inaugurated the shared history of 400 years, weaving together diverse peoples and cultures. For some of us who are Native American this event begins a long history of invasion, genocide, exploitation, and the denigration and loss of native land and religious traditions. For others of us who are African American this event marks the port of entry of slavery and forced migration. Yet, in spite of this painful history, we are grateful to God that we have survived and thrived in this land. This



Commissioners at Table Fellowship: L to R: Gwynne Guibord (Episcopal), myself, Terry Muck (Former Commission member) and Frances Adeney (Presbyterian Church USA)

event also marked the beginning of the permanent presence of Protestantism in North America. The church too has thrived in this land. However, we recognize and confess that many churches supported the structures of this racism.

The 2007 commemoration of the founding of Jamestown provides a *kairos* opportunity for Christian churches to focus upon their solidarity with indigenous peoples and reaffirm our commitment to combat racism. In addition, the Commission expressed a desire to examine the missiological assumptions that led to such atrocities 400 years ago, and to engage in process of re-thinking those in the context of the new immigration patterns that have led to significant cultural and religious diversity in the United States.

Christian Muslim Leaders' Dialogue

In other actions, the Commission re-affirmed its commitment to convene a Christian Muslim Leaders' Dialogue table. Rather than invite Muslim leaders to a table organized by Christians, the Commission acknowledged the need to invite Muslim and Christian leaders to a common table. We have now convened a planning group comprising interfaith staff of Christian denominations and Muslim organizations to prepare for such a common table to convene next year.

Fellowship with the Canadian Council of Churches

One of the highlights of this Montreal meeting was an opportunity to have dinner and fellowship with the leaders of the interfaith relations work of the Canadian Council of Churches. This was preceded by an hour of fellowship and sharing common concerns and thinking about common efforts. Our special thanks go to Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches, for helping us organize this.

Apocalyptic Theology: Its Challenge to the Church

By Robert O. Smith

With the media attention generated by the founding of CUFI (Christians United for Israel) earlier this year, it would seem that mainline concern regarding Christian Zionism is a new thing. It is not.

The new developments have come in understanding just how much Christian Zionism supports trends influencing U.S. foreign policy at sharp variance with positions taken by many church bodies, including the NCC. By rejecting all peace plans for Israel/Palestine, even those proposed by President Bush or even the State of Israel itself, while at the same time advocating for preemptive military engagement with Iran, it has become clear that Christian Zionism is a theologically-charged ideology promising to lead us into little else than a cul-de-sac of confrontation.

The first step in addressing the matter of Christian Zionism is to properly define the term. As it is used here, “Christian Zionism” does *not* refer simply to Christian support for Zionism (Jewish nationalism). In fact, Christian Zionism preceded Jewish political Zionism. Furthermore, not all evangelicals are Christian Zionists.

Instead, Christian Zionism finds its foundation in Premillennial Dispensationalism, a system of biblical interpretation one might identify as “rapture theology.” Its keystone verse is Genesis 12:3—“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” Because biblical prophecy is presupposed to tell us about the future, the blessing here extends from biblical times to modern Israel, the catalyst of prophetic countdown. Thus, for Christian Zionists, our political alignment with the State of Israel is the measure of our faithfulness to God’s purposes.

I come at this issue with some level of personal experience. I grew up in an Assemblies of God mega-church in Oklahoma City, Okla. We would often have Trinity Broadcasting Network’s “Praise the Lord” program broadcast from our worship space on Sunday evenings. My first Christian years were filled with a steady diet of the Rapture and impending nuclear doom, all organized by what I now understand to be a Christian Zionist framework.

I’ve since left that form of Christianity, in favor of what one might reasonably call a liberal Protestant form of Lutheranism. Although I’ve made this journey, it isn’t my interest to attack my own foundations. My grandmother still attends the church of my childhood. The top shelf of my parents’ bookcase is filled with every hardback volume of the Left Behind series.

I’m not interested in attacking people who simply love Jesus and support the State of Israel. Instead, I’m interested in engaging in serious, biblically-based, ethically-responsible conversations with people who comprehend and periodically reconstruct Christian Zionist thought-systems, persons who seem to take little notice of this ideology’s harmful outcomes.

I take that task of reproof and correction as the first task of mainline churches in response to Christian Zionism. In this ideology, we have more evidence that followers of Jesus are among those who have itching ears, who “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires” (2 Tim. 3:16, 4:3), ones who teach “human precepts as doctrines” (Mark 7:7).

Beyond its political effects, Christian Zionism harms faithfulness to the Gospel by confusing proper church-state relations and by foreclosing the future. Dietrich Bonhoeffer



Robert O. Smith is the Lutheran Campus Minister at the University of Chicago. He wrote *Christians and a Land Called Holy* with Charles P. Lutz (Fortress Press, 2006)

once observed that living as a human means having “responsibility towards the past” and a “desire to shape the future.” If we just wait for the rapture escape pod, there is no incentive toward risky acts of service, no willingness to engage human ambiguities.

Because the predominance of this ideology is a problem for the entire Christian community in North America, we must not point our finger only at others, including the propagators of this perspective. Instead, we must be willing to take the log out of our own eye so we can see clearly to take the speck out of our neighbor’s eye. (Matt. 7:3–5). This internal conversation—focused on inoculating our own communities against Christian Zionism’s pernicious effects—is the second task of the church in relation to this ideology.

When it comes to concern for justice and peace in Israel/Palestine, there are many dimensions to our log-filled vision. Logs abound when we forget that, although it has its

ultimate foundations in England, Christian Zionism fully bloomed only in North American churches, and we do not realize that even the most mainstream churches are permeated with its influence. Perhaps one step to address this reality would be for NCC member communions to conduct internal surveys of laypersons and church leaders to determine the extent of this influence.

Other logs are present when, concerned with justice in the Holy Land, we cast an accusing eye toward Jews. It is quite understandable that Jewish friends are concerned with implicit or explicit accusation. I have argued elsewhere that, in our post-Holocaust context we must engage this conversation not as “righteous innocents” but as “empowered perpetrators.” This is the case all the more when we realize that Christian Zionism, our very own movement, further complicates Middle East peacemaking.

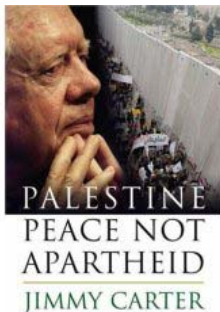
The logs in our eyes can also perpetuate our blindness to the plight of Palestinian (and other Arab) Christian communities. Christians in the Middle East hoped to bring this issue to our attention with the August 22 release of “The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism.”

It is to our shame that our Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers were the originators of such a statement. The ideology of Christian Zionism is our own issue, the log in our own eye, perpetuating their suffering under the effects of occupation and domination. Through this statement, they have issued a call to responsibility and fidelity ... to the Gospel and to each other.

Resources for Interfaith Relations

Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid Jimmy Carter (Simon and Schuster: 2006)

The former President's new book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid" is igniting controversy for his use of the word

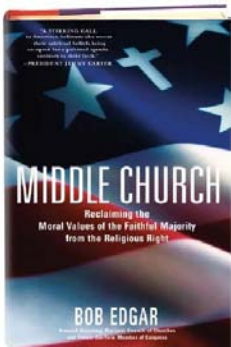


"Apartheid;" a word from which many of us have stayed away. Carter does not call Israel an apartheid state; he refers to Palestine. That Arabs in the West Bank do not have the same rights as Israelis is not an argument but a fact. West Bank Palestinians are not citizens of any country and do not have the rights of citizenship anywhere. M.J. Rosenberg of Israel Policy Forum writes, "And that is why most Israelis

are eager to divest themselves of the West Bank. They understand that precisely because Israel is *not* an apartheid state, if it holds on to the territories, it must eventually grant Palestinians the same rights Israelis enjoy. But that, if it does, Israel would be transformed from a Jewish state to a bi-national one in which an Arab majority could outvote the Jewish minority." And therein lies the rub! Now the word is on the table, and we can't avoid talking about it!

Middle Church: Reclaiming the Moral Values of the Faithful Majority from the Religious Right Bob Edgar (Simon and Schuster: 2006)

NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar's book "Middle Church" is a strong challenge to "middle of the road" Christians, Jews and Muslims in America urging them to wake up and wrest national attention away from a Christian Coalition agenda that focuses on hot-button issues like homosexuality and abortion in stead of more biblically relevant issues of Peace, Poverty, and Planet Earth. The religious right, he says is "a version of faith so at

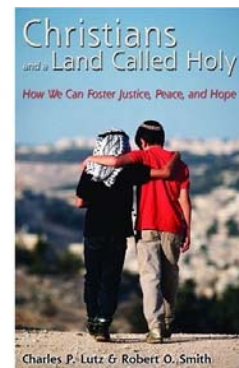


odds with mine, so contrary to the central teachings of Christianity, Judaism and Islam that it condones poverty, condemns peace and contributes to the despoiling of God's creation." He calls on the "middle church:" people of faith who are centrists, somewhat deferential and largely silent, to return to the central message of Jesus' ministry—the imperative to love one's neighbor—and judge public policy by that measuring stick.

Distinguishing himself from the Religious Right, Edgar, a former six-term Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, writes: "As for me, my faith shaped how I viewed political issues, but I no more believe that God endorses my political agenda than I think he would vote for anyone else's. I've never believed that people should agree with me because of my vocation. And, given the recent political history, I can't help but recall with a smile that, during my first campaign for Congress, the Republicans began a telephone attack campaign against me. "Did you know," they would ask in hushed and sinister tones, "that Bob Edgar is a *minister*?" Evidently, they saw it as an insult. The voters, fortunately, decided it was an asset."

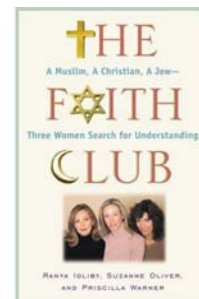
Christians and a Land Called Holy: How We Can Foster Justice, Peace and Hope Charles Lutz and Robert O. Smith (Fortress Press: 2006)

With journalistic clarity, and aided by photos and maps, Lutz and Smith provide a clear account of the situation and a compelling plea for Christian involvement in the Middle East. Carefully sorting out the tabled historical and religious roots of the problems, they reveal the strong forces at work in the bitter and divisive clashes of the last fifty years, the driving biblical notions of election and covenant, the turmoil's effects on Palestinians (particularly Christians) and how, finally, Christians can help secure a future of justice and peace.



The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew — Three Women Search for Understanding Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver and Priscilla Warner (Free Press: 2006)

The Faith Club is a memoir of spiritual reflections in three voices that will make readers feel as if they are eavesdropping on the authors' private conversations, provocative discussions, and often controversial opinions and conclusions. The authors wrestle with anti-semitism, prejudice against Muslims, and preconceptions of Christians at a time when fundamentalists dominate the public face of Christianity.



They write beautifully of their families, their losses and grief, their fears and hopes for them and their loved ones. And as the authors reveal their deepest beliefs, readers watch the blossoming of a profound interfaith friendship and the birth of a new way of relating to others. In the end, it is a powerful invitation to women all over the world to form Faith Clubs in order to engage in similar conversations



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