

Introduction

Welcome to the second issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2015. This issue looks at the World Council of Churches' latest efforts to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to explore further inter-religious initiatives to bring a just peace to the Middle East. It also features a report on a call by Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, Al-Azhar's Grand Imam, for educational reforms to combat terrorism.

World Council of Churches new push for peace in Israel and Palestine

A delegation from the World Council of Churches (WCC) conducted what it called a 'visit of solidarity' to churches and people in Israel and Palestine from 7-12 March. The group included leaders of the WCC Central Committee and key staff members, and was framed as a concrete expression of 'the pilgrimage for justice and peace', a new initiative to support the peace process in the Holy Land and in the Middle East. In addition to meeting with heads of WCC member churches, the delegation met with Jewish and Muslim leaders, along with various human rights groups.

The visit came just a week before Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement, in his bid to be re-elected, that there would be no Palestinian state on his watch. Though the WCC is officially neither pro-Israeli nor pro-Palestinian, it has been an outspoken supporter of a two-state solution and a critic of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the building of settlements. An expressed purpose of the delegation's visit was to strengthen two of the WCC's efforts in this regard, the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) and the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF). These efforts have received widespread support from its member churches, but also criticism from some Israeli commentators and Christian Zionists. The WCC visit comes just a few months after Pope Francis' visit to the Holy Land, during which he also called for recognition of an independent Palestinian state.

The WCC delegation's visit was also aimed at strengthening and exploring further inter-religious initiatives to bring a just peace to the Middle East, beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is a key component, as well, of the pilgrimage for justice and peace initiative. Ironically, the very week of their visit to Israel and Palestine, King Abdullah II of Jordan was in Strasbourg, France, making an impassioned speech to the European Parliament in which he called for 'meaningful interfaith outreach' in order to 'combat the global rise of Islamophobia' and to stop the 'outlaws of Islam...these terrorists [who have tried to]...hijack our faith'. There was a similar refrain in the Holy Land from WCC general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, who said with regard to the WCC initiatives for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, 'We believe peace can be achieved only together with the other'.

World Council of Churches press release, 'WCC leadership focuses on peace-building and inter-religious initiatives during a solidarity visit to Israel and Palestine', 12 March 2015, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press->

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[centre/news/wcc-leadership-focuses-on-peace-building-and-inter-religious-initiatives-during-a-solidarity-visit-to-israel-and-palestine](http://www.trust.org/item/20150319124855-73u3c/?source=spotnewsfeed)

Luke Baker, *Reuters*, 'With "no-state" pledge, Netanyahu reignites Palestine debate', 19 March 2015,

<http://www.trust.org/item/20150319124855-73u3c/?source=spotnewsfeed>

Rafiq A. Tschannen, *The Muslim Times*, 'King Abdullah II tells European Parliament religious coexistence combats extremism', 10 March 2015, <http://www.themuslimtimes.org/2015/03/countries/jordan/king-abdullah-ii-tells-european-parliament-religious-coexistence-combats-extremism>

Dexter Van Zile, *The Commentator*, 'World Council of Churches attacks Israel to no gain', 3 June 2013,

<http://www.thecommentator.com/article/3682/world-council-of-churches-attacks-israel-to-no-gain>

Commentary Anthony O'Mahony, *Director Centre for Eastern Christianity, Heythrop College, University of London*

Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is just one point on the compass for a Middle East that is confronted with a wide and deepening crisis across the region: Sunni-Shiite conflict in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and the Gulf region; indiscriminate anti-Christian violence that has accompanied the upsurge of radical Sunni Islamism across the Middle East and North Africa; breakdown of societies due to civil war that has displaced many millions, particularly in Syria and Iraq; deep and growing divisions between the poor and the rich; those who have power and those who do not; and the profound and on-going challenge to the existence of Christianity in the region. The peace process in the Holy Land is not an isolated event; it is increasingly interwoven into complexities of sectarian politics; cultural displacement leading to disorientation and religious nationalism.

Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has dominated their relationship for the best part of the last century and right up to the present today. This conflict has had a profound impact upon the political culture of the region. In the last few decades, under the banner of religious identity, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has often emphasised a growing estrangement between Jews and Muslims. This has increasingly been centred on the whole question of access and rights to the Holy Places of the two religions. Jerusalem's uniqueness among other holy cities is that it is where different religions and different political aspirations converge. Thomas Stransky, emeritus rector of Tantur, has called this a deep 'crisis of religion in the Holy Land', a place where 'All-hungry history consumes the present, and dulls the imagination's appetite for dreams of the future'.

It has been noted that too often the peace process has done the least to attract the participation of those with most energy and incentive to undermine it. Another group that has invariably been ignored in this conflict is the Christian Churches, those communities that have found their presence increasingly under pressure. On the whole, Christians in the Holy Land have not received from the wider Christian world the unified support needed to guarantee their future. The Christian concept of reconciliation, the repair of relationship and restoration of communion, is a fundamental expression of the character of Christianity and one which Christians seek to assert in demonstrating their identity. From a Christian perspective, reconciliation is an essential aspect of redemption. For Paul in the New Testament, reconciliation is in the first place reconciliation with God through Christ. The revealed foundations of Christian hope in reconciliation have been challenged throughout the history of the Church. The question is: what valid witness do Christians provide when they too are divided?

The historic meeting between Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, in January 1964 in Jerusalem was a bold symbol of the desire for such reconciliation.

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The meeting last year between Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew, again in Jerusalem, continues to witness to the desire to establish communion between these two churches. The lifting of mutual anathemas and the establishment of an official ecumenical dialogue between them should be seen as a sign, and a profound witness to a divided age.

Head of Al-Azhar calls for educational reforms to combat terrorism

Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Cairo, has called for educational reform in Muslim countries to combat the global trend of extremism. The leader of Sunni Islam's most prestigious university said during a speech on 22 February at a counter-terrorism conference in Mecca that 'bad interpretations' of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, alongside 'a historical accumulation of excessive trends', were to blame for the escalation of terrorism in the Middle East. Al-Tayeb urged clerics from across the Muslim world attending the conference to focus on Muslim schools and universities to correct these trends and spread more accurate Islamic teachings.

These statements seemed to indicate a subtle shift of emphasis for the Grand Imam, who last autumn had said the jihadists of the Islamic State were 'criminals...that serve Zionism in its plot to destroy the Arab world'. Likewise, late last year – in a speech to an audience comprising Egypt's Coptic Pope, 600 Muslim clerics, and heads of Christian churches from 120 countries – he seemed to blame the West for the rise in militancy in the region. Al-Tayeb said then that he wished 'the arms factories in the West would experiment with their weapons and their efficiency in the desert instead of the bodies and the installations of Arabs'.

Al-Tayeb is one of a growing number of Muslim leaders who have condemned terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram, and have emphasized education as a counter measure. In January, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader and one of the world's most influential spokesmen of Shi'a Muslims, made headlines by writing an open letter to Western youth and encouraging them to read about Islam and discover that it is far from a violent religion, as it is so often portrayed. Countering terrorism through education and other means was also a key agenda item at the Asia-Africa Conference celebration in Jakarta and Bandung, on April 19-24, 2015. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, hosted the event, which included representatives of over 50 countries and 23 Heads of State, as well as numerous international organizations.

The Guardian, 'Top Muslim cleric Ahmed al-Tayeb urges education reform to counter extremism', 22 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/top-muslim-cleric-ahmed-al-tayeb-urges-education-reform-to-counter-extremism>

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Ali Hashem, *Al-Monitor*, 'Khamenei's message to the West', 27 January 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iran-foreign-policy.html>

Mariam Rizk, *Ahram Online*, 'Egypt's Al-Azhar head blames "enemies" plot for rising militancy', 3 Dec 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/117080.aspx>

Abhishek Shukla, *Outlook India*, 'Asia, Africa condemn "Terrorism" at 60th Commemoration of Bandung Summit', 22 April 2015, <http://www.outlookindia.com/news/article/asia-africa-condemn-terrorism-at-60th-commemoration-of-bandung-summit/892935>

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During the afternoon of (Western) Palm Sunday, I joined thousands of Tunisian men, women and children – plus a large cavalcade of world leaders and local politicians – in marching from Bab Sadoun to

Bardo in Tunis. It was a march of solidarity with victims of the shocking, earlier shooting at Bardo museum, and a peaceful expression of rejection of extremist violence perpetrated in the name of Islam. At one point I was stopped and asked (I was dressed in my purple cassock with pectoral cross) to be photographed with some Tunisians in front of a large printed canvas sign that quoted part of Sura 5 (*Ma'ida*): 'If anyone slew a person ... it would be as if he slew the whole of humankind'. This was a good sentiment and I gladly submitted to photos with new friends in front of it. When I got home, I looked up the verse and discovered that it comes in part of a text referencing the story of Cain and Abel. Quite deliberately, God speaks of his view, made known to the children of Israel, of a person who wickedly murders another. In the same verse, God commends a person who saves an individual life: 'It would be as if he saved the life of the whole of humankind'.



Getting people to examine seriously the qur'anic text – hopefully one main application of Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb's promotion of 'educational reform' – seems to me to be a positive step. In this instance, such examination will raise the question of Islam's relating to Judaism, or the qur'anic take on the *Tanakh*. It will lend itself to discussion about what constitutes 'excesses in the land' and the ignoring of prophetic warnings. It will complicate the discussion through the caveat given in the words omitted from the canvas quotation: '... unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land...'. Perhaps the Grand Imam was not so far from this verse in his suggestion that the jihadists who murdered Maaz al-Kassasbeh through caged immolation, deserved to be killed or crucified for their 'excessive trends'.

Serious 'educational reform', however, carries considerable risk. The jihadists of Islamic State who killed the Jordanian pilot did so whilst quoting Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century Islamic scholar, historically revered as *sheikh al-islam*, whose claimed re-introduction of 'original' interpretations of the Qur'an and the Sunnah strongly influenced the development of Wahhabism and, more recently, Salafism and Jihadism. Ibn Taymiyya famously issued a fatwa authorising Muslim Mamluks to conduct *jihād* against Muslim Mongols. Is the Grand Imam going to take on Ibn Taymiyya and his theological progenies? If so, how?

I believe that educational reform is several steps better than simply treating extremist Islamism as a security issue to be defeated by locking people away or executing them. I hope it will be truly educational and truly informative and dare to openly address the matter of hermeneutics within Islam. How are Qur'an and Hadith to be interpreted? What does one make of the concept of jihad as it has been elucidated from those two sources, especially in the light of the principle of abrogation? Can the various historic recensions of the Qur'an be readmitted and reconsidered for study and comparison? How does prophetic example, from Medinan days especially, justify or limit

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the use of violence to establish and enforce an Islamic state and governance by application of shari'a? Is there space for a contemporary, 'Mu'tazilite' (rationalist) approach to qur'anic exegesis, or is 'educational reform' to be strongly circumscribed and allowing only of a self-sustaining 'orthodox' view that reflects the nuance of, say, an 'enlightened' Wahhabism or a more magnanimous Shi'a Islamism? In other words, who will be allowed to have a voice in the 'educating' and 'reforming'?

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