

Palestine a secular state?

This morning my email included this request. The "[UCC] Synod / [Disciples of Christ] General Assembly" was the first time these denominations have held a joint national meeting.

WEE -

How terribly sad! - There was a workshop at the Synod/General Assembly which I attended re the Middle East situation and my sense was that the Jews are escalating much of the violence - but the media makes it appear that the Muslims are protagonists!

What of the Arab Christians!

How can we help?

Please put your thoughts in a Think Sheet about these current issues.

Thank you!

Dear _____ --

Sad, indeed. Indeed, two sadnesses: (1) "the Middle East situation," & (2) the mainline's consistent (underdog?) pro-Palestinian stance.

1 "Consistent." Almost $\frac{1}{4}$ century ago, I was dumped from the National Council of Churches Task Force on the Middle East after writing a white paper (distributed by the Presbyterian Church to its Middle East missions & representatives): my paper was too even-handed for the pro-Palestinian task-force leadership. (But the distributing by Presbyterian Missions showed that the mainline was not monolithically pro-Palestinian.)

No one should be surprised that, in light of NCC's pro-Palestinianism, Jews have looked on NCC with suspicion & in some cases hostility. A third sadness: Reconciliation & pro-human mutual action between Jews & Christians is a far shorter step than between Muslims & either Christians or Jews.

2 The Arab world considers the NEW YORK TIMES the world's most powerful Jewish newspaper, & there's just enough truth in the exaggeration to make fair-minded folks squirm. The fact that NCC (457 Riverside Dr.) is not all that many blocks uptown from NYT goes a little way toward understanding the mainline's pro-Palestinianism as counter-propaganda. All newspapers are necessarily biased even if only in what they consider (to use the NYT's motto) "fit to print," i.e. in their editorial selections. (Not as bad as television's "nightly news" programs, which are severely limited in time even with--as the Lehrer Report--little advertising.)

To correct for the NYT's bias, my custom as a commuter to Grand Central was to read both it and the HERALD-TRIBUNE (till it died). Now the correcting is easier. To correct & supplement the CAPE COD TIMES, each morning I Net-read a small batch of others (this morning: NYT, WASHINGTON POST, BOSTON GLOBE, & CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR). Total daily newspaper time (considering that I have fast cable for computer)? About an hour--about the same length of time I devote to OTHERworldliness (i.e., prayer, devotional reading of Scripture [in Hebrew/Greek/Latin/German], & attention to classics of the spirit). Equal time for the below- & the above-world. The below-world first, so I'm better prepared to see it in the light of the above-world.

3 Just when it seemed to liberals that the time for **religio-nationalism**, faith-based tribalisms, had come & gone--here they came again, almost over the entire planet! The Kurdish dream of a national homeland, "Kurdistan," gained enough energy to worry the five geographical nations constituting this people's primary places of residence. And the "next year in Jerusalem" Jewish dream of a national homeland birthed Zionism, more of a peoplehood than of a faith movement, which birthed the State of Israel,* more of a peoplehood than of a faith political reality.

The Kurds have no prospect of gaining the political clout to convince the five governments to yield them the land required to create Kurdistan. And the Israelis, despite having the world's most efficient-effective military, do not have the prospect of maintaining a Jewish state with a majority nonJewish population, which would be the on-the-ground situation if Israel were to extend its military-political control to the whole of Palestine.

Effort  Subjects

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4 And everybody in the know knows that a political Israel coextensive with the land of Palestine is an impossible dream. Milosevic's dream of being Tito Redivivus, master of the Balkans, has died calamitously. Empires, always unstable, have become in our time virtually impossible to create, sustain, or re-create. But old imperial dreams die hard.

5 Behind Israel's creation of "the settlements" (in territories the UN 1947 territorial division had assigned to the Palestinians) was driven by the old Davidic-imperial memory & dream: "God in the Bible gave this land, Eretz Israel, to **us**!" BIG exegetical-theological problem: *did* God? As an orthodox-liberal Christian, I must say yes & no. Mugwumpery, you may call it: my mug on one side of the fence & my wump on the other. And I'm serious, not indecisive. But I'll have to defer this to another Thinksheet: it's a sidebar to this one.

6 I've no doubt: if there's to be the territorial division a Palestinian state would require for its very existence, the settlements must die. Abba Eban, great Israeli statesman that he is (& my favorite among the living), will be remembered for his bon mot "Arafat never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity." In 1947-48 the Palestinians missed the UN-proffered opportunity to form a State of Palestine, sharing the divided land with the State of Israel. Then, for decades, the Isrselis had no settlements, only kibbutzim (agrarian communes, which Loree & I visisted in 1958).

Think of the colossal irony: the Palestinian dream of "driving the Jews into the sea" drove the Jews (one might say) to build settlements on Palestinian lands! One must face the sea (the Mediterranean) to push anybody into it, & another--in this case a "settler"--may, during the push, creep in behind & set.

7 We don't know what happens to the Palestinian dream when it dies, it's not dead yet, & on-the-ground reality (it seems) can't kill it. For being "out of it," the PLO is the champ among failed minority movements. Behind what looks like mindless obstinacy, & actions (such as intifadas) that only deepen deprivation & woe, lies the qur'anic prohibition against permitting infidels (i.e., nonMuslims) to occupy & dominate any land once Muslim-held: when Arafat "gives ground," he's more than a failed leader, he's an unfaithful follower of the Prophet. That fact, seldom figured into the calculus of his nonMuslim interpreters, makes consistent sense of his otherwise-thought-to-be erratic behavior, his so often saying one thing at the negotiating table & another thing to his people. His conception of truth is elastic enough to accomodate what to outsiders looks like duplicity: in his mind & heart, he's behaving consistently & with integrity. It's an old saw in psychotherapy, as you know, that most people can't stand much reality--a truth Hitler in his last days, & Arafat now, are spectacular examples of.

Arafat believes that if the Arab world & the wider world see his people's deepening suffering & loss, somebody will come to help: he himself will not help by taking off the table any of the demands which would mean the death of the State of Israel (e.g., the "return" of the millions of "Palestinians" who've never been in Palestine).

8 Your workshop leadership accused "the media" of making it "appear that the Muslims are protagonists." Read "Palestinian [Arabs]," not all of whom are Muslims, though the Christian population of Palestine has been in steady decline since 1948 (Christian Arabs, being the best educated Arabs, being more mobile, more able to emigrate). And "appear"? The reality is that, with the exception of jumping the gun in some areas of the 1967 war, Israel has never initiated violence: always it's been nonIsraeli Arabs attacking Israel, from the five/six Arab armies in 1948 to this latest, now-ten-months-long intifada. The world media have played it straight & the Palestinians have called it propaganda. Sadly, much of American mainline-liberal Christian leadership has PLO-party-lined, feeding Arafat's illusion that outside help is on the way. "How can we help?" By prayer (especially by praying the Lord's Prayer, which is trans-political) & by speaking truth (as we perceive it) to power (at home & abroad) through love (in service). "The Jews are escalating...the violence"? Only in the limited sense that when hit, Israel hits harder...."Palestine a secular* state?" When the religio-ethnic nationalisms exhaust themselves. When? Within the next century.