

Editorial

Observations from the World of Kafka, Schweik and Havel: Christians and the War in Gaza

In a lengthy interview in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* of September 5, 2024 pastor Sally Azar of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem asked why Christians from Europe and North-America profess so little solidarity with Christians of Palestinian origin. They feel isolated and ignored in their suffering, she said, because Western churches are largely silent about what is happening to Palestinians in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. It is indeed this question that Christians in the West have been challenged by during the last year. The struggle to find a credible answer has become a crushingly difficult experience to many Christians in their relation to the Holy Land and its inhabitants. Differences and tensions occurred in communities of Christians who before shared a common ground on issues of human rights, social and political justice, solidarity with the suffering and commitment to values of peace.

The horrific attack of Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023 caused a wave of solidarity from Western Christians. Shortly after this act of terrorism, on October 13, the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, the publisher of *Communio Viatorum*, issued a statement expressing shock and support for colleagues and friends of partner institutions: “With horror, we watched the news of the murderous attack on the population of the State of Israel conducted by Palestinian terrorists during the holiday season. The attack was carried out with brutal and indiscriminate violence against defenceless people. There is no justification for such a vile act for any reason or objective. Those who planned and carried out the attack showed disregard for human life, including the lives of their own people, whom they exposed to a retaliation that must have been reckoned with. Acts of malice and hatred cannot lead to good, nor will their escalation lead to good. We express our solidarity with all those affected, among whom are the families of our friends

and colleagues at the universities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. We pray for the wounded, for the abducted, for all those who have lost someone they loved. We are grateful to all those who are working to help those affected, to stop the violence and to overcome hatred.” Our editorial in CV 2023/2 reported already about the discussions at the PTF in Prague.

Many reactions of theological faculties or church leaderships were stressing similar aspects, sometimes more explicitly calling for restraint in the reaction from the side of Israel. Comparisons were drawn with pogroms against Jewish populations in European countries in the past, with the conclusions that the Hamas attack was the first time since the Second World War that Israelis were slaughtered on this scale. To express some form of solidarity with Palestinians and to draw attention to the wider context of the conflict between Israel and Palestinians, to call for a certain nuance in the understanding of the situation became almost impossible, as in the public debate such voices were too easily and unrightfully identified as a justification of the terror attack of Hamas.

After the Israeli Army started its operations in Gaza, a group of Palestinian Christians addressed an emotional open letter to their Western counterparts with the title “A Call for Repentance” (the letter of October 20, 2023, can be found on change.org). They speak about double standards on the side of many Western Christians. “We come alongside fellow Christians in condemning all attacks on civilians, especially defenceless families and children. Yet, we are disturbed by the silence of many church leaders and theologians when it is Palestinian civilians who are killed. We are also horrified by the refusal of some western Christians to condemn the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine, and, in some instances, their justification of and support for the occupation. Further, we are appalled by how some Christians have legitimized Israel’s ongoing indiscriminate attacks on Gaza [...]” The letter criticized the position of the majority of Western Christians as a result of a prevailing “colonial theology” that justified violent acts toward indigenous people committed by Western powers. Western Christians should instead share the condemnation of all violence as promoted by Palestinian Christians, the letter concluded, because otherwise they share a partial responsibility for the suffering of the Palestinians caused by the Israeli armed forces.

In the Czech Republic, a country with a strong tradition of human rights defenders, the open letter of Palestinian Christians provoked a debate in church circles. This materialized in a response to the letter formulating

a position which in the Czech context is doubtlessly a minority voice (as were human rights defenders), but strong in its courage to express solidarity with both Israelis and Palestinians. “We join the voices demanding the end of the fighting, immediate ceasefire and, the quest for a solution to the tragic humanitarian situation of more than a million internal refugees in Gaza,” the letter published mid-November stated (it can be found on Christnet.eu). As the signatories of the letter were aware of their minority position, they apologized for an uncritical support of Czech society and churches for Israel’s policy towards the Palestinians. “As Christians and citizens of the Czech Republic we apologize for that to you. It is also our fault, that the Czech public, including the churches, has in the long term defended an uncritical pro-Israel stance and that it widely overlooks the Palestinian perspective. Our voice should have been stronger and louder.” The Czech support for Israel has certain historical roots, but should not be bluntly interpreted as a support for the current Israeli government, the letter explained. It is rather to be understood as an adherence to certain Jewish theological and spiritual traditions among Czech Christians. These traditions are compatible with a defence of human rights and the rule of law, the letter underlined. “This gives us a possibility to develop the part of Jewish religious and spiritual tradition that is universal, and which forms a base on which many Jewish Israelis and Jews in the world are leaning their long time support for the Palestinians, are pointing to the violation of Palestinian rights and necessity of just solution of the conflict in the Holy Land, including the viable Palestinian state.”

The discussion in Czech circles (the signatories of the letter came from both a protestant and a catholic background) was partly a parallel to a discussion in the Netherlands. Also there a group called Christian Collective criticised the churches for its lack of solidarity with Palestinian Christians. In its letter of November 2023 the Collective expressed its understanding for the cautious stance of many European Christians towards Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, but warned that this couldn’t justify a blind spot concerning the situation of Palestinians. “As Christians, we are aware of a long European history of anti-Semitism. From a Christian perspective, Jews were often reduced to bystanders in a future expectation that assumed they would repent and return to Israel prior to the Second Coming. We are equally aware of unconditional, even blind Christian support for the state of Israel. For too long, Christians have paid no or too little attention to the oppression of Palestinians.” This letter coincided with a call for solidarity written by Frank

Chikane of Kairos South Africa and Michel Sabbah of Kairos Palestine. They draw a parallel between the situation of apartheid in South Africa and the situation of Palestinians in the Holy Land. In an urgent tone they stressed that Western Christians cannot be silent in the unfolding events: “Human rights have no borders of religion, culture, class, race, or gender. [...] The West needs to understand that you are placing the values of democracy and human rights at significant risk, in effect delegitimizing it, if you continue your current trajectory.”

The discussion and the criticism in Dutch church circles resulted indeed in an acknowledgement of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands that it had been too silent about the developments in Gaza and the suffering of the Palestinians. The Dutch church, which since the Second World War has a strong tradition of theological solidarity with the Jewish people, came on Good Friday (March 29) 2024 with a statement which tried to uphold this solidarity as well as to stress the necessity of respecting human rights. “For the Protestant Church, it is clear that it can never be a matter of ‘choosing between sides’, but rather an ongoing quest for how peace and humanity can be served. The Protestant Church is called to an unfailing commitment to the people of Israel, but that is explicitly not the same as the state of Israel, let alone the Israeli government. At the heart of the commitment is that Christian faith is not conceivable without Jewish roots and that the church is called to dialogue with Judaism. The Protestant Church sees (international) law and human rights defined in international treaties as the primary point of orientation for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict. A use of religious arguments to claim territory, for example from a vision of ‘Greater Israel’, the church continues to reject – whether such a claim is based on Jewish-Zionist, Christian-Zionist or also Islamist principles.” The statement called for a ceasefire, release of hostages and a society based on freedom, equality, human dignity and justice.

Also in the Czech context criticism to the position of churches on the War in Gaza resulted in a nuancing on the side of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. On the initiative of some church members the synod of the church formulated a cautious statement with the title *We stand on the side of the victims*. The document avoided a condemnation of the violence and destruction used by Israel in Gaza as the Dutch statement did, but stressed solidarity with all those who are suffering. “In the face of the ongoing conflict and its victims, we ask ourselves many questions. We impose restraint on

ourselves when it comes to uncritical positions. Rather, let us look within ourselves for openness and sensitivity to those who suffer on both sides of the conflict. We need to return a face to the victims on both sides and listen to their stories. We express our compassion for all those whose lives are once again affected by the violence in Israel and Palestine, who are suffering or who are suffering the loss of loved ones. We appreciate the efforts of the humanitarian organisations that are helping the civilian population of Gaza and pray for their work and safety. Last but not least, let us also remember with our support those who seek peaceful coexistence.”

The attack of Hamas on Israel and Israel’s response in destroying Gaza put Christians and churches in Europe and elsewhere (especially those who adhere to traditions of ecumenism and human rights) in a position where they have to face a theologically existential question. To them, as an outcome of the reflection on the holocaust, the relationship to the Jewish people has been defined as one of kinship: the Christian Church is an offspring of the Jewish Synagogue and acknowledges the theological Israel as the first people of God. Atrocities like the ones Hamas inflicted on Israel on October 7, 2024, are therefore easily understood as a new attempt for a holocaust. At the same time the tradition of universal human rights and the rule of law, to which these churches adamantly adhere, draw them into a direction where they would have to criticize Israel for its violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people. As the developments since October 2024 have shown, Western (ecumenical) churches have great difficulty to find a credible answer to the situation they find themselves in.

This issue of *Communio Viatorum* brings a variety of articles. One of them – on process theology – deserves to be highlighted as it is written by our colleague in the department of systematic theology Petr Macek, who recently reached the blessed age of 80. His perspective inspired by a tradition of non-violence (he himself coming from a Baptist background) is a great enrichment of our theological discourse in a time of conflict and war. May he continue teaching us and working with us in good health.

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