

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE GAZA CRISIS



On Monday 14 May Israeli soldiers shot at least 58 people and injured 2,771 others in one of the bloodiest days in Israel's history, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry. The protests in Gaza were, in part, a response to the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem but were more broadly part of a six-week protest called the "Great March of Return," in which Gazans are demanding the right to return to the homes they were evicted from 70 years ago, at the formation of Israel as a nation.

Opposing reports immediately appeared in mainstream media, either condemning the Palestinians for using civilians as human shields or condemning Israel for their "disproportional" response.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lashed out: "Netanyahu is the Prime Minister of an apartheid state. ... He has the blood of Palestinians on his hands and can't cover up crimes by attacking Turkey." On Twitter, he went on to accuse Israel of occupying the land of defenceless people in violation of United Nations resolutions. He suggested that Mr Netanyahu consult the Ten Commandments if he wanted a lesson in humanity.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu replied by defending his country's response to protests in Gaza and blamed the territory's ruling Hamas party for the violence. "They're pushing civilians – women, children – into the line of fire with a view of getting casualties. We try to minimise casualties. They're trying to incur casualties in order to put pressure on Israel, which is horrible," Mr Netanyahu told *CBS News*.

The reality, in any war where faith is central to the conflict, is that anybody with an opinion feels obliged to choose a side. There is no doubt that this conflict has stirred the emotions and hearts of many Christians as well, and justifiably so. Scripture refers to Israel time and time again as a nation chosen by God and most Christians understand, and defend, the Biblical commission to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. There is also a deep recognition that Israel has a right to exist as a nation, just as any of the other nations within the Middle East.

However, anybody that chooses only one side in this complex conflict is choosing wrongly, simply because even though there might be many legitimate reasons for attacking or protecting, there are no legitimate excuses for how both sides are responding.

The question that Christians need to consider is not who is right and who is wrong, or who is to be blamed for the countless deaths and deep trauma, but how to maintain a position of being "peacemakers" in a region of perpetual war. As soon as we take sides and start pointing fingers we lose the neutrality that is required from anybody who hopes to reflect the author of peace, Jesus Christ. **If we as Christians cannot find a middle ground in dialogue, how can we expect Israel and Palestine to find middle ground during war?** After all, we have been given a mandate of reconciliation and, as children of God, a message of peace:

- Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
- James 3:18 "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

But, sadly, many Christians have joined the secular media in finding scapegoats and demonising either the Israelis or the Palestinians. And in this uncompromising conflict there have been three major casualties:

- NON-DUAL THINKING,
- IMPARTIALITY and
- TRUTH

NON-DUAL THINKING

Ephesians 4:3-6 "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God

and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” (NIV)

The major casualty in the Israel/Palestine conflict, among many Christians, is probably the ability to seek the truth with a non-dualistic mindset. This is a challenging concept, but critical in building a bigger capacity for impartial truth. Many Christians spend most of their lives organising their theologies around what they believe, personal morality, and neat demarcations of who is “in” and who is “out” of God’s favour and Kingdom. Most of our theologies are often based on “us and them”. This creates a kind of “tribal” approach to truth, which refers to in-group/out-group thinking.

This is especially true in the Israel/Palestine conflict. Regardless of where our empathy lies, we often choose sides with clear demarcated borders that separate “them” from “us”. In an interview¹ with Father Richard Rohr², Ryan Thomas Neace addressed the issue of “non-dualistic thinking” and a working definition of dualism. Father Rohr answered as follows:

“The natural way the mind already ‘knows’ as a child is in opposition to something else. It’s funny that we have to have this explained to us, but you wouldn’t know what ‘cold’ was unless there was such a thing as ‘hot’. If everything in the world was the same temperature, we wouldn’t have these words.

Unfortunately, we create those contrary words as necessary for the world we live in - that is, all kinds of comparisons, and competitions, and antagonisms... It becomes our primary way of reading reality.

So, since this is the way we naturally think, very soon we tend to think oppositionally. For some strange reason, the ego prefers to make one side better than the other, so we choose. And we decide males are better than females, America is better than Canada, Democrats are better than Republicans. And for most people, once this decision is made, it is amazing the amount of blindness they become capable of. They really don’t see what’s right in front of them - everything has to be understood in opposition to something else. Once you see this, it’s an amazing breakthrough, and that is the starting place for moving away from dualistic thinking.

This is why Jesus made so much of mercy, and forgiveness, and grace, because these are the things that, if truly experienced, totally break dualism down. Because once you experience being loved when you are unworthy, being forgiven when you did something wrong, that moves you into non-dual thinking. You move from what I call meritocracy, quid pro quo thinking, to the huge ocean of grace, where you stop counting, you stop calculating. That for me is the task of much of the entire spiritual life of a saint - they fall deeper and deeper into that ocean of grace and stop all the counting of ‘how much has been given to me’, ‘how much I deserve’. It’s reached its real low-point in our own societies today, which is almost entirely about counting and deserving and earning — we call it a sense of entitlement. When you’re trapped inside of that mind, you’re going to have the kind of angry communities we have today, where you’re just looking for who to blame, who to hate, who to shoot. It’s reaching that level.”

IMPARTIALITY

Acts 10:34-35 “So Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’.” (ESV)

Through decades of conflict Israel has become a battlefield of convictions between more than just Israel and Palestine. Others have joined the war and simply by expressing an opinion have run the risk of becoming an enemy, being labelled either an “apartheid Zionist” or a “ Hamas terrorist”. Both extreme labels are equally fruitless and confirms the danger of losing an objective heart of compassion before an impartial God.

According to a large-scale attitude survey, conducted by The Pew Research Centre (in 2006, and updated in January 2016), there is an endemic anti-Jewish sentiment in the Muslim world and a pro-Jewish sentiment in the Western (Christian) world.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-thomas-neace-/father-richard-rohr-on-ra_b_6606206.html

² Father Richard Rohr is the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the author of more than 25 books about Christian spirituality.

The research revealed the following:

Muslims nations with **UNFAVOURABLE** views of Jews:

- Jordan – 100%
- Lebanon – 99%
- Egypt – 98%
- Morocco – 88%
- Indonesia – 76%
- Pakistan – 74%
- Turkey – 60%

Western nations with **FAVOURABLE** views of Jews:

- Netherlands 85%
- Germany 83%
- France 82%
- Spain 80%
- Canada 78%
- UK 78%
- USA 77%

The study also found that overall, Muslims blame the West for the bad relations, while Westerners tend to blame Muslims. Furthermore, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia depict Westerners as immoral, selfish, and violent, while Westerners see Muslims as fanatical.

It is quite evident that partiality is influenced by perception and very often our perceptions are fed by our selective sources. As Christians we need to be open to listen to both sides of the battlefield. We need to remind ourselves to have a “scout mentality” and not a “soldier mentality” — metaphors for how all of us process information and ideas in our daily lives, either by “attacking and defending” or

“exploring options and finding the truth”. Having good judgment and making good decisions, it turns out, depends largely on which mindset we have. We often view information that differs from our convictions as “the enemy”, and we want to shoot them down and defend our own opinions, especially in an emotional issue like Israel/Palestine.



Partiality and suspicion are two characteristics that have no place in the hearts of “peacemakers”. Many Christians hold Israel in such high esteem, due to their position in Scripture as God’s ‘chosen nation’, that they fail to see that Israel can also be guilty of using excessive force, for example, or at fault within a particular situation.

TRUTH

John 1:17 “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (ESV)

Grace and truth cannot be separated in the presence of Christ. The emotions stirred in the hearts of many believers often refer only to the truth of Scripture without adding the grace of our Lord. We often refer to attacks on the nation of Israel as unacceptable, but at the same time refer to the killings of Palestinians as self-inflicted. We neglect to see the heartache of hundreds who have suffered the trauma of pain, loss and suffering on both sides of the divide, when only defending the cause of one. Truth can never exist outside the framework of grace.

Selective truth is a further enemy of neutrality and at war with reconciliation. One of the single biggest obstacles in finding truth is selective learning; a false teachability that only accepts the reports of those we agree with — or should I say, those who agree with us.

We love to learn on a horizontal level where our opinions are always confirmed, even when proven wrong. We seldom venture into a vertical level of excavation, where we learn from those who think differently to us.

Truth is never one-sided. The biggest lesson in finding a well-balanced truth is to learn how to hold opposing convictions without denying who we are. F. Scott Fitzgerald said: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

To which we could add that a true Christian response to the Israel/ Palestine conflict is the ability to listen to all the opposing convictions and still retain the ability to hold on to your own.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

A fitting conclusion is to consider the perspective of Palestinian Christians. The following excerpt from a statement issued by the **Bethlehem Bible College** in the West Bank in July 2014 (after **Operation Protective Edge** – a military operation launched by Israel in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip – following the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas members).



Even though the statement was issued in 2014, the principles still hold true and are applicable to the current situation. May we take to heart the words of those who share – not from the safety and security of a war-free zone, but from a place where conflict is a way of life.

“We at Bethlehem Bible College consistently called for a just peace for both Israelis and Palestinians. We always sought a nonviolent resolution to the conflict. As Christians committed to nonviolence, we do not and cannot endorse Hamas’ ideology. However, we believe that the people of Gaza have the right to live in freedom and dignity. This means that the siege over Gaza should be lifted and the borders should be open. The people of Gaza need a chance to live. We oppose Hamas launching rockets at Israeli towns and cities. At the same time, we are shocked by the disproportional and inhuman response by the Israeli military and the disregard of civilian life and especially innocent women and children.

We are grieved by the mounting hate, bigotry and racism in our communities today, and the consequent violence. We are especially grieved when Christians are contributing to the culture of hatred and division, rather than allowing Christ to use them as instruments of peace and reconciliation.

In the face of this, we affirm that we are against killing children and innocent people. We support love not hatred, justice not oppression, equality not bigotry, peaceful solutions not military solutions. Violence will only beget wars, it will bring more pain and destruction for all the nations of the region. Peace-making rooted in justice is the best path forward. Therefore, we commit ourselves to spread a culture of love, peace, and justice in the face of violence, hatred, and oppression.”

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