

8 Feb. 1980

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The NCCC and the Middle East
Walter Harvelson
Vanderbilt University

Introduction

1. The 5 issues identified by the NCCC Panel on the Middle East are put in such a way as to prejudice the hearings and the draft gathering. I have not seen the draft statement on Middle East policy, but I find it astonishing to see nothing in these 5 areas about the right of Israel to secure borders or the right of Israel to exist. I also find it strange to have the settlements issue posed as it is posed, with little or no recognition of the long-time existence of Jewish communities in the West Bank areas.
Surely the NCCC wants to give a fair hearing to all sides. Slanting the hearings by inflammatory and clearly unbalanced statements of the issues does no good.
2. The search for a Middle East "policy" may be misleading. Why not seek to develop a statement that clarifies

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the issues, that shows the complexities of the Middle East situation? In my judgment, no policy statement can be devised that will gain acceptance by virtue of its cogent logic, its persuasive rhetoric. What we need are statements that show depth of commitment by the NCCC + its member Churches to the search for peace with justice in the Middle East. We need a summons to all parties to grant the difficulties, to work to overcome them, and not to lose heart or resort to violence.

We need above all to encourage the development of plans for peace, plans not likely to be acceptable to all parties but one of which may be tried. The NCCC can help by its own efforts to get Christian groups to try again, never to give up on God's commitment to peace with justice in the Middle East.

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- 1) The right of the Palestinian Arabs to national self-determination.

To head the list of issues with this one and to include a sub-question about the US's recognizing the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, is to invite the charge of NCCC bias or naïveté. Does the NCCC seriously wish to consider backing the PLO in its efforts, including the destruction of civilian life with indiscriminate bombings of buses, markets, and the like?

The right of Palestinians to live in peace and to occupy land that they have owned, or to receive fair compensation for the land, must surely be affirmed. If "national self-determination" is taken to mean, as a minimum, the creation of a separate state in West Bank territory that will be a major threat to the security of Israel, then it is not to be affirmed as a right beyond challenge. The history of the area since 1947 shows that Israel has reason to be gravely concerned for its safety.

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It does no good to insist on the right of the Palestinian people to national self-determination and make no demand for the responsible exercise of the duties of citizenship by the Palestinians. Many Palestinians did not, of course, support or engage in violence during Jordan's occupation of the West Bank. Many have not done so since 1967. Many want only peace with justice. But others clearly want nothing less than Israel's destruction. Any kind of self-determination that makes it easier for such Palestinians to pursue their criminal intent cannot be condoned; it certainly cannot be considered a right.

Some kind of state or entity in the West Bank, having ties with both Israel and Jordan, probably can come into existence — and should. It should be noted that there are now certain relations with Jordan that Israel has maintained (the government schools, e.g.).

The NCCC could well seek to help identify the various possibilities for creating such an entity on the West Bank, with a specification

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the depth of suspicion that the parties would have toward any plans so far devised.

It is for this reason that the NCCC must work for clarification of the overall situation in the Middle East, and not for some "policy" statement that will be sure to be slanted, unbalanced, rationalistic, + pretentious. The NCCC should help its member Churches to see what the scarcity of oil does to our attitudes toward the Middle East. It should show how absurd it is to blame Israel for that scarcity. It should not overlook what has happened in Iran, both before and after the overthrow of the Shah, and what opportunities might emerge for a settlement between Israel and her neighbors as other threats in the Middle East have been developing. Keeping hope of progress alive is immensely important. Some breakthrough can take place quite unexpectedly.

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2) Security in the region.

The paragraph in the NCCC statement is so obscure that I cannot penetrate its meaning or intent. Security in the region should be discussed in relation to the territory from Egypt to Afghanistan, of course, and in relation to the involvements of the USSR and other powers, esp. the U.S., in this region. It should not overlook oil, but neither should it overlook commitments made to assist in the maintenance of peace. The role of the U.N. is of great importance, at least potentially.

The NCCC can help the situation by showing how many different groups threaten the life & future of Israel and of the Palestinians. Some Christian Palestinians fear Muslim pressures more than they fear actions by Israel. The West Bank Christian Arabs, many of them, see their livelihoods endangered by Muslim economic pressures. They see their children in the government schools exposed to Islam and denied any Christian exposure.

Some Israeli groups may be more fearful of Palestinian inroads from West Bank areas,

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Should the latter become autonomous, then is necessary. But PLO bombs are still being set off in Israel.

3) Human rights issues.

These issues should be investigated in the usual ways. Violations of human rights in all of the Middle East, not least in Iran, need to be identified. The use of the U.N. Declaration & Covenant is quite worthwhile. The recent resolution to the NCCC by the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of New York and North America is not a guide to follow. It is not a balanced statement and it uses "sources" that are themselves either false or badly slanted attacks upon the state of Israel.

Violations of human rights do occur in all lands, including the U.S., including Israel, and including other Middle East lands. The military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza offers problems to Israel in the protection of human rights. The rights

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of persons subject to military occupation have always been exposed to violation. Israel's occupying forces have made mistakes, have violated the rights of West Bank inhabitants. But we need to bear in mind that 1) terrorists have been at work against Israel there; and 2) in several instances, the institutions of the state of Israel have punished Israeli offenders. The Redress is possible and has been secured. The rights of the inhabitants of the West Bank are not less well protected than are the rights of citizens in the neighboring states.

The NCCC may be able to perform a valuable service by identifying alleged instances of the violation of the rights of persons in the Middle East and pressing for responsible investigation. If the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese had called for that kind of action, the call should have been welcomed.

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4) Settlements on the West Bank.

This item is a matter hotly debated within Israel. The NCCC should seek to publicize the variety of attitudes within Israel dealing with current Israeli settlement policy. The NCCC can also help by publicizing the fact that settlements are of different kinds, began many decades ago, serve different ends, and call for negotiations of the most complex kind.

The attitudes within Israel and among Jews and Christians ^{elsewhere} towards the land of Israel, especially towards historic Israel, are varied, complex, and deeply held.

The NCCC might make a valuable contribution by launching another study that deals with the religious/theological significance of the land of Israel in biblical times. Considerable work has been done on the matter, and on the significance for today of this biblical picture. See Walter Brueggemann, THE LAND (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

5) Religious issues.

These should be the focus of attention. The panel should get local religious groups within Israel and the West Bank to do quiet, intensive work on some of these issues.

- a. The curriculum on religion in government schools.
- b. Arab Christian fears of Arab Muslim pressures.
- c. Religious persecution of any kinds — in all areas of the Middle East.
- d. The numbers, location, and needs of Christians in the area.
- e. Jerusalem — its place in Judaism, Islam, Christianity.

The World Council of Churches might best institute some of the above studies — if it can do so without bias.

Concluding statement

This testimony is offered with very grave misgivings. I do not like to see the NCC/C arrogate to itself the responsibility to set out basic policy statements on the Middle East that are intended to show where the member Churches stand. The member Churches need help in understanding the complex issues, but they

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do not need statements, or even study groups, that do not reveal the depth of feeling within the different groups on the incredibly complex issues that are before the parties now seeking to find a way to peace in the Middle East.

The NCCC can call its member Churches to prayer — prayers of penitence for the crimes of Christians against the Jews and prayers of penitence for the neglect of eastern Christians by western Christians. It can also urge its member Churches and the governments of the nations to keep up hope for peace with justice in the Middle East. It should not be impossible to identify those individuals and groups who most deter the coming of peace with justice. It is also possible to identify those in the forefront of the struggle for peace. Let those belonging to the latter group be named, and let us pray that their number increase.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE 37240

The Divinity School

14 Feb. 1980

Prof. Alice Eckardt
Lehigh University
Dept. of Religious Studies
Bethlehem, PA 18015

Dear Alice:

Well, I was on hand yesterday for the NCCC hearings in Washington, and they put me on the witness bench first thing -- at 9:30 instead of at 11:00 as scheduled. I had the full attention of all, it seemed to me, and was asked a few good questions.

Enclosed is a copy of what I said. I have sent a copy also to Don McEvoy at the NCCJ office in New York, together with my request for \$150 towards the cost of expenses.

Hope it all does some good. It was clear that the protests about the slanted statement initially issued had done some good; a revised statement was given me that was indeed much better. And I think that the panelists there were interested in doing a good job.

Sincerely,

Walter
Walter Harrelson

cc: Don McEvoy
Steve McArthur, NCLC - Israel

WALTER HARRELSON
Vanderbilt Divinity School
Nashville, TN 37240, U.S.A.

30 January 1980

Mr. Arleon L. Kelley
National Council of Churches
475 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 10027

Dear Mr. Kelley:

Many thanks for your letter of January 10 with the
enclosures.

I shall be attending the hearings in Washington, D.C.
on February 13 and shall be representing the Israel
Study Group, of which Alice Eckart of Lehigh University
is the President. Alice has been in touch with you,
I believe.

The 35 copies of my material will be sent to you
prior to the hearing, as requested.

Please note that I shall be at Lafayette College,
Easton, PA, care of Prof. Earl A. Pope, 215/253-6281
from the evening of February 9 until the early morning
of the 12th of February. Prior to the 9th I can be
reached here in Nashville (unless I notify you to
the contrary).

Sincerely,

Walter
Walter Harrelson

cc: Dr. Alice Eckart ✓