PALESTINIAN THEOLOGY IN THE HOLY LAND: LIBERATION THROUGH CONTEXTUALISATION IN PALESTINE & ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the development of a theology of Christian liberation and contextual polity as part of the Palestinian people’s struggle for justice and freedom from the state of Israel. This article will be primarily dedicated to a historical and political analysis of the theological context, mainly focusing on the theology of the Al-Liqa group that contributed to the development of a contextual Palestinian theology of liberation within the ‘occupied’ context that is Palestine today. The theo-political contributions of other Palestinian theologians have been raised as well as the case of Palestinian Christian theologians such as Latin Catholic Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah, the Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour and the former Episcopal Bishop of Jerusalem Rev. Riah Abu El-Assal who have all contributed to the development of liberation theology and contextual Christianity in the Palestinian setting.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Contextual Theology, Palestinian Politics, Arab Christianity, Palestinian Nationalism and Palestinian Christianity.

Introduction

Palestinian Christianity has long roots dating right back to the time of Jesus Christ. Even during the Byzantine era, Palestinian Christians did not have any experience being part of the ruling party as the Byzantine Church in Palestine was ruled and controlled by Greeks and Cypriots. During the Islamic era, the majority of the Palestinian people slowly converted over to the ruling faith and by the eve of the Turkish conquest of Palestine in 1519, the land had become majority Muslim. Coupled with this was the almost continually disturbed nature of Palestinian society that resulted in large-scale emigration over the last 100 years or more. Today, native Christians in Palestine worry more about whether they can ensure adequate quorum in their churches to make them practically viable as part of the ‘living stones’ of the Holy Land. Palestinian Christians are small in number, but their contributions to society vastly outnumber their actual population. Their institutions, schools and hospitals dot the Holy Land and they are actively involved in rendering valuable social services to the Palestinian population at large.
The Bethlehem-based organization known as Al-Liqa (in Arabic; Encounter) was set up in 1982 with the aim of creating dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. Initially, the organization formed part of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies, Jerusalem, and was actually part of one of their ecumenical outreach programmes. According to its website, Tantur was set up in 1971 after the Vatican bought and then subsequently leased the hill-top land between Bethlehem and Jerusalem on the old Jerusalem-Hebron road to the University of Notre Dame (USA) for fifty years to build and operate an ecumenical research institute in an internationalist, albeit Catholic ambience. The inspiration to form Tantur evolved from the Second Vatican Council where some of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant participants from the Holy Land asked Pope Paul VI to start an ecumenical research institute in Jerusalem.1

Tantur’s mainly international focus, in keeping with its use as an overseas research institute of the University of Notre Dame in the United States, meant that local Palestinians felt increasingly ill-at-ease there. Tantur’s programmes were mainly focussed on Jewish-Christian dialogue, emphasizing the priorities of the American sponsors of this organization. Palestinians were looking for a centre that would address specifically the issue of Muslim-Christian dialogue and Al-Liqa separated from Tantur and established itself as a separate centre in 1987. Al-Liqa was first set up in the mid-1980s in Beit Sahour (a suburban town close to Jerusalem and one of the Christian triangles in the West Bank comprising of Beit Laham-Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala).

Al-Liqa’s striking success at that time (a tradition that it continues even now), was that it was able to bring together Christian and Muslim leaders and theologians in the land to explore issues of contention as well as agreement between them. This was crucial as it occurred during a period when there was a general tendency among people of all faiths in Palestine-Israel to look abroad for help towards other foreigners of similar faith, rather than spend time dialoguing with their own brothers and sisters of different religions at home. It was not to expected that major issues (political and theological) of difference between the two faiths approaches could be solved easily, but the dialogue set up helped to ease built up misunderstandings as well as even certain theological misapprehensions and tensions, thereby creating channels for further communication and vital personal networks of communication that could always be activated at will and when there was a crisis in inter-faith and inter-communal relations. Al-Liqa, in this sense, would always have a niche in the Palestinian faith landscape.2 Al-Liqa was not only dedicated to theological studies, but to research into all aspects of life, religious, cultural and secular, of the indigenous people of the Holy Land region.

Al-Liqa had developed a contextualised theology that took into consideration the existence, needs and cultural aspirations of the Muslim and Christian communities of Israel-Palestine-Jordan (henceforth referred to as IPJ). Al-Liqa Centre holds regular conferences on two major topics: ‘Theology and the Church in the Holy Land,’ and ‘Arab-Christian and Muslim Heritage in the Holy Land.’ Both Muslims as well as Christians participated in the activities of this centre. While Sabeel’s main focus was on advocacy work in the West, seeking to make Western Christians understand the situation of Palestinian Christians, Al-Liqa focussed on developing a sense of unity and purpose among Palestinians of all religious persuasions and inculcating in them a
sense of purpose about their shared culture and socio-religious heritage. The document ‘Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land: Palestinian Contextualised Theology,’ published by the Al-Liqa centre stated that,

Our contextualised Palestinian theology does not mean isolating ourselves, withdrawing within ourselves or writing a new theology developed outside the general trend of Christian thought or in contradiction to it. What we mean is a theology which can live and interact with events so as to interpret them and assist the Palestinian church in discovering her identity and real mission at this stage of her earthly life.³

Dr Geries Sa’ed Khoury was the founding director of the ‘Al-Liqa Centre for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land,’ Al-Liqa’s main centre was in Bethlehem in the West Bank of Palestine, but it also had influence among the Palestinian Christians of the Galilee, particularly in the once largely Christian town of Nazareth, as well as in the upper Galilee region, with its large proportion of Palestinian inhabitants. Geries S. Khoury himself was a Melkite Greek Catholic Christian from the Greek Catholic village of Fassuta in the Galilee. A recent Arabic language book by Geries Khoury, based on his extensive scholarship of the post-Islamic Christian Arabs and their contributions to the development of Arab civilization and culture as well as the present theological status and political issues of the Arab Christians of Palestine/Israel, was Arab Masihioun-Arab Christians (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa Centre, 2006).⁴ For him, Palestinian contextual theology should serve to inculcate a spirit of national awareness among Palestinian Christians. It should be a means by which the Palestinian national struggle became a common struggle of all Palestinian people for a free, secular and democratic homeland.

A common understanding and request of Palestinian Contextual Theology (PCT) in this context was the demand for achieving a secularized and nationally responsible education system in the Palestinian territories that reflected the sensitivities and aspirations of the Christian community within Palestine. In short, PCT, as propagated by the Al-Liqa centre in Bethlehem sought to develop a sense of awareness about the Christian Arab heritage of the Holy Land and its myriad facets, including theological, philosophical, historical and political factors that had contributed to the development of the unique identity and psyche of the Christian Arabs since the early Middle Ages of the European era. The Al-Liqa centre sought to temper the overtly Islamic attitude of the Palestinian educational system, so as to create an awareness of the contributions made by Christian Arabs to the development of the Arab civilization.

Geries Khoury himself had stated how there were literally hundred of thousands of Arabic language Christian manuscripts stored in the libraries of various museums and patriarchates (various monastic as well as patriarchate libraries), awaiting detailed study and translation as well as an adequate imputing of this concealed knowledge into various publications, books, journals and otherwise, so that the scholarly world might be aware of the great contributions made by the Christian Arab sphere to the development of interreligious and other dialogue in the greater Middle Eastern region. He lamented the fact that this knowledge had so far, over the last thousand years or more, been concealed and hidden from the popular eyes of both the East as well as understandably the West. Medieval Christian theologians in the so-
called Arab world generally wrote their theology in the vernacular Arabic language, though other Semitic and Greek languages were used in church and seminary services. Indeed, the Arabic language was a major factor fostering the unity of various theologians belonging to various competing Middle Eastern churches of different shades and variations of theological leanings.

Khoury himself, in the course of his extensive research into medieval Arabic Christian literature (he had two Ph. D degrees, both from Italian Universities in medieval Arabic philology), had discovered that the Arabic church theologians often acknowledged that the divisions among them were more due to linguistic differences, perpetuated among Christians from different ‘national’ church and sectarian traditions within the Middle Eastern region, than due to theology (which was and is generally the issue most highlighted among scholars and in the popular perception, to show the differences among various historic and present West Asian churches). PCT sought to highlight the contributions made by the Arab Christians to the development of an Arab Christian-Muslim dialogue during the time of the Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East and its potential lessons for the present period in the field of Islamic-Christian dialogue. After the arrival of Islam, it was a necessity for Levantine Christians to enunciate a theology that would be contextual, indigenous, and would appeal to the new Muslim rulers in the language of their choice, namely Arabic.

Non-Greek, non-Byzantine Christians of the territories conquered by the Muslim armies saw their arrival as a form of salvation against the totalitarian theocracy of the Byzantine Greeks. It could be argued that the Oriental church survived because it bothered to enter into a dialogue with the Arabs. Arabic was not the first language of choice for Christians when the Muslims arrived in the Levant in the 7th century AD. However, it rapidly became the lingua franca as communication between the conquerors and the conquered was a must for both mutual as well as national survival. The Oriental church found better cause for survival under the Arabs that under the Byzantines, who tended to be contemptuous of those Christians unwilling to accept the Greek language and Orthodoxy in toto.

In contrast, after centuries of living under Islamic and proto-Islamic rule, Levantine Christians were largely united among themselves and with other fellow non-Christians by virtue of their common culture and the Arabic language. The centre sought to make dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Palestine, the centrepiece of their efforts in favour of developing an all-encompassing national consensus on the Palestine problem. Palestinian Christian Theology must be concerned with a dialogue with Islam as well as with Judaism.

Khoury related how Palestinians were a victim of an ‘ideologised’ reading of scripture that was used to argue that the land of Palestine was actually the ‘Promised Land’ of the Jewish people. He referred to Leviticus 25:47 with its theology of the ‘resident aliens,’ and stated that it would be impossible from a theological as well as political perspective, for the Palestinian people to accept such a claim to their land. Khoury made the specific claim that the Palestinian Christian claim to interpreting the Old Testament and the whole question of the ‘holy’ land must be done in a way that goes much deeper than contemporary Zionist Jewish political interpretations and definitions.
A Palestinian contextualised theology was ‘a meeting place for East and West, for Christian and Muslim, for Christian and Jew, for Palestinian and non-Palestinian. It was the promise of a nation in the Holy Land. It was a theology of communication between peoples, cultures and religion.’ Geries Khoury’s preferred term for any nascent endeavour to develop a Palestinian theology of liberation was simply just ‘Palestinian theology.’ He was not against the term ‘liberation theology,’ but would prefer to call any theology that sought to root the local Palestinian church within its own local context and setting, by the seemingly nationalist term of a ‘Palestinian theology.’ For Khoury, liberation theology or Palestinian theology did not start yesterday or today.

Christianity was born in Palestine and Jesus Christ himself, born under the Roman occupation of the region, was in many respects the first preacher to speak and teach a Palestinian theology of liberation. This again was a point repeatedly made by Naim Ateek and other Palestinian theologians and clerics interested in contextualising theological practise in Palestine-Israel. Geries Khoury emphasized that Palestinian Contextual Theology (PCT) was not a theology in any way against or in opposition to Islam. He quoted the historic experience of the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, who sought the middle path of coexistence and collaboration between the historic Christian community of Jerusalem and the Holy Land and the new Islamic conquerors of the region.

The contextualisation of the Christian faith in the new Islamic settings in the Holy Land involved a theology of dialogue with Islam, through which Sophronius managed to save the mother church of Jerusalem, by a mixture of compromise, collaboration and astute diplomacy. For Khoury, the indigenous Christian church in Palestine would not be able to survive unless it could consider itself an integral part of the Palestinian people in the Israel-Palestine region in general. Khoury, as a member of the old Palestinian fraternity within the state of Israel that was born within the British Mandate of Palestine, gave a call in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the Israelis to leave the occupied territories. He exhorted Palestinian Christians to consider the Israeli occupation of their territory as a real ‘sin,’ the only solution which would be for the Israelis to vacate the ‘occupation.’

A difference from Latin American liberation theology was the emphasis on ecumenism. Geries Khoury emphasized the necessity of developing an ecumenical community theology that would reflect the richness and historical diversity of the different Christian faith traditions in the Holy Land. As he put it,

There is not a separate Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, or Anglican need for justice, or work, or land or identity. Different traditions should bring their riches not their arguments or anything which undermines the strength of our unity. For the contextualised theology is in the message of all the church together........It is in an ecumenical theology through which we sought to encourage church unity of word and action.

Khoury was insistent that PCT should seriously consider more cooperation between the nations of the south, especially in the field of ecumenical exchange. He was certain that PCT was and had to be a theology of the Third World. In this context, he saw many similarities between the situation of the Palestinian people and that of
the black South Africans during the Apartheid regime. For Khoury, the need of the hour was for the Palestinian Christians, whatever their denominational affiliation, to develop an ‘ecclesiology of the local church’ that would serve to overcome the historic fragmentation and divisions that the church had been exposed to over the ages, thereby enabling the Christian inhabitants of Palestine to speak with one voice. He felt that only in this context could the survival of the Palestinian Christian community as a coherent, sustainable and self-reliant Arab group in the region be ensured.10

Fr. Rafiq Khoury, who also wrote in the Al-Liqa journal (he should not be confused with the above-mentioned Dr. Geries Khoury), argued that Middle Eastern Christians had a special vocation for Islam and the Islamic world. Fr. Khoury had always been active in ecumenical circles in the Holy Land Christian circuit. His composite background, highly erudite qualities and good scholarship had meant that he had played a vital anchor role over the past forty years (he was ordained priest in Jerusalem 1967) within and also outside the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Khoury belonged to the earliest generation of Palestinian native priests with the highest level of educational accomplishment (he has a PhD in Catholic Education). As a result, he has been the leading light behind various activities at the Patriarchal headquarters regarding the Catechetical Centre and the Secretariat for Christian Educational Institutions in Jerusalem. Fr. Khoury has also been very active in the Al-Liqa Palestinian Heritage study centre, and was on the board of directors from the very beginnings of the centre in the early 1980s. He was the Managing Editor of Al-Liqa quarterly review. He also functioned as Director of the Parish Synod in the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

According to Khoury, their relation with Islam and the Islamic world was what makes Middle Eastern Christians ‘unique’ in the Christian world. Middle Eastern Christians had a long history under Islam, for approximately three centuries as a majority in the region and later as a minority, though a relatively large one for centuries, until the turn of the twentieth century. The Constantinian ‘acceptance’ of Christianity as the official faith of the Roman Empire meant that Palestine became a ‘Christian’ land for roughly three centuries until the arrival of first, the Sassanid Persians and then shortly after that, the forces of the Islamic Caliphate.

There were however two Christian Empires, one in the East and the other in the West and as a result two ‘versions’ of the ‘one and only’ Catholic Christian faith developed. One point made repeatedly by Khoury in his analysis of the role and history of Middle Eastern Christian Churches was the fact that these Churches and the ethnic groups represented by them had never known the ‘privilege’ of having an ethno-political entity that corresponds to their wishes ruling over them. Native Arab as well as Palestinian historians and theologians, whether Christian or Muslim had never viewed the Byzantine Empire, while solidly Greek and Christian, as a ‘localised’ entity, preferring to see it as a foreign group. This was despite the fact that the predominant language of the Levant till well into the Arab Era was either Greek or Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus Christ Himself.11

The Islamic experience remained ‘a decisive and rich experience’ in the eyes of Middle Eastern Christians. Khoury warned that Christians in the Middle East
should not seek to create an ethnically homogeneous and politically independent entity of their own in the region, as any attempt in the past to do so, had only resulted in catastrophe. He referred to the Christian political experience in Iraq under the immediate post-Mandate phase in the 1920s and Lebanese Christians fateful dalliance with a controlling stake in political sovereignty during the second Lebanese civil war from 1975 to 1989 as examples. The Christian condition as a minority in the Middle East had seriously affected the social and psychological condition of Levantine Christians. Khoury quoted from various pastoral letters of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs in the Middle East to show how the status of a minority in the Middle East had negatively affected Christians in the Middle East to the extent that they were being increasingly forced to migrate in large numbers, due to a crisis of confidence in their continued residence in the region.12

As Rafiq Khoury put it,

This (Islamic) history left an indelible imprint on the Christian Churches which makes of them not only Churches within Islam but also Churches for Islam. When we want to determine our vocation and mission, Islam is an obligatory path.13

At the same time the Millet system under the Ottoman Empire served to solidify the differences between the people. In Rafiq Khoury’s opinion, only the establishment of a truly ecumenical framework in the Middle East would ensure Christian survival.14 He quoted from the statement of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East in their first common message in 1991, which maintained that, ‘In the East, we will be Christians together or we will not exist.’15

Rafiq Khoury maintained that the process of ‘inculturation’ in the Middle East was always an unfinished process. The Middle East today was characterised by the tendency towards Westernization and globalisation on the part of an elite as well as largely secularized middle class, while at the same time, there was a deep appreciation and understanding of indigenous culture and religious identity on the part of a large mass of the population on the other side.16 Because Christians were identified with the West, their Muslim neighbours sometimes distrusted them. Rafiq Khoury wished to address this suspicion.

The Palestinian Contextual Theology Centre Al-Liqa has made it a major plank of its mission to seek reconciliations and common ground, both cultural and political, between Christians and Muslims in Palestine and the greater Levant in general. The Israeli scholar of Palestinian Christians, Daphne Tsimhoni (whose landmark Ph. D work from SOAS in the early 1970s was one of the first works to look in detail on the impact of Arab Nationalism on the Greek Orthodox of the early Mandate period) has referred to Rafiq Khoury as the most islamicised of all Palestinian Christian scholars and theologians.17

**Patriarch Michel Sabbah**

Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the first native Palestinian Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, was actively involved in questions of peace and faith in the Holy Land. In his pastoral letters he emphasized the need for Christians to follow peaceful paths,
whilst endorsing the legitimacy of Palestinian struggle. The most important of his letters raised the question of biblical interpretation.

In his pastoral letter (November 1993) titled ‘Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible,’ Sabbah urged a Christ-centred approach to reading Scripture.\(^{18}\) He argued that difficulties with reading the Hebrew Bible as ‘the Word of God’ could lead to a new Marcionism.\(^{19}\) He warned the faithful not to be influenced by their current socio-cultural and political position in making a reading of the Bible, particularly its most controversial sections, which might seem directly applicable to the present condition of the Palestinian and Israeli people. He was also concerned about ‘unilateral or partial’ interpretations of the Bible which might call into question the presence and status of the Palestinian people in their own homeland.\(^{20}\)

He asked,

What is the relationship between ancient Biblical history and our contemporary history? Is Biblical Israel the same as the contemporary State of Israel? What is the meaning of the promises, the election, the Covenant and in particular the ‘promise and the gift of the land’ to Abraham and his descendents? Does the Bible justify the present political claims? Could we be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favour the Jewish people and condemn us? Is that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favour of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?\(^{21}\)

For Palestinian Christians who, after the Arab nationalist euphoria of the Nasser years, had generally held to concepts of non-violence, reading the Old Testament with its accounts of divinely sanctioned violence against the non-Jewish population could be a traumatic walk in faith, especially when juxtaposed with an appropriation of violence by radical Islamist elements within the majority Muslim community in Israel-Palestine.\(^{22}\) Sabbah raised issues that had prominently figured in the theological writings of earlier as well as later Palestinian theologians, especially as regards the promises of God, the ‘divinely ordained’ gift of the land, the concepts of election and the divine covenant between YHWH (Jehovah: One God of the Hebrew people) and the Jewish people and its present repercussions for Palestinians and Israelis.

Sabbah emphasized that ‘divine election’ was a free and gratuitous move on the part of God by which He had called all people to walk according to His Law, by which ultimately one achieved salvation. God’s Word told us that the Hebrew people were initially called so that through them many others would be called to faith in God. In time, God would send a messiah through the Jewish people who would be the Saviour of the world, for those who believed in Him. They would be known as Christians. Election therefore involved an ‘act of love on God’s part’ and a corresponding act of responsibility on the part of the chosen people towards God and their fellow men.\(^{23}\) Sabbah emphasized that one was chosen, not because of any particular skill or merit on our part, but because of the great grace and mercy of God. Again he used the example of the eleventh hour labourers to illustrate that there was no space for jealousy or envy in the field of ‘chosenness.’ On the contrary, what was
needed was humility, as both those ‘chosen’ as well as ‘not chosen’ should come together in a vision of ‘love, justice and finally, reconciliation.’

Sabbah dealt in detail with some of the issues affecting Palestinian Christians and others in the Middle East in his analysis of controversial issues from the Bible. He first raised the issue of violence in both the Old as well as New Testaments. After providing a survey of texts that seemingly authorise and justify violence, he included a selection of texts which condemn it. In order to reconcile what must appear as two contradictory visions of ‘divine’ teaching as regards the use of violence in the Hebrew Scriptures; he appealed to the divine mystery that is God. He quoted Romans 11:33-34 to show that humans cannot understand the mind, the motives and the acts of God. God alone was responsible for his ‘divine’ actions in this world. God’s Will was also revealed to us as a progressive revelation. As divine revelation was progressive, one cannot make sense of the Will of God without taking into consideration the entire sequence of prophetic scripture from the first book of the Bible in Genesis to the last in Revelation in the New Testament.

Old Testament violence as sanctioned by God often dealt with punishment for transgression of God’s divine Commandments or Law. Sabbah emphasized this because the foundation of the state of Israel involved the uprooting and driving away of hundred and thousands of Palestinians from the former Palestine, acts that Israelis and Zionist rabbis often sought to justify on the basis of Old Testament practice and precedence. Right-wing religious rabbis often sought to justify the hard-fist policies of the Israeli military on the tactics and practice of ancient Israelite warrior heroes like Samuel, David, Gideon, Barak, Samson and Joshua.

It was in this context that Sabbah made reference to the so-called ‘Law of Anathema’ (total destruction) as applicable to the conquered non-Israelite (Canaanite) people in the Old Testament. Again his implicit reference was to the activities of Jewish right wing terror groups’ right from the time of the Irgun and Stern gangs during the Israeli War of Independence (Palestinian Nakba of 1948) and the subsequent activities of the so-called ‘Kach’ militant settler and terrorist movement (established to terrorise Palestinians and West Bankers in the late 1970s and early 80s), founded by the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, a disciple of revisionist Zionist revolutionary Vladimir Jabotinsky.

The Law of Anathema was pronounced in the case of the conquest of many Canaanite cities such as Jericho, Ai and others, with the order from God going out that all the people who did not believe in the one and only God (YHWH) must be killed. Sabbah also related how concepts of divine justice underwent evolution over the ages, becoming progressively more and more moderate until in the New Testament, we read about the divine exhortation through Jesus to love one’s enemy and to pray for those who persecute us (Mathew 5:38, 43-44). Divinely sanctioned violence in the Old Testament was always used as a means of protecting the Holiness of God.

Sabbah emphasized that each of the three main monotheistic religions had an equal right to remain in the land that was holy for each. However, the political rights of each of these religions could only be decided in the context of understandings reached with the current political authorities of the land. Sabbah also raised the point
that God was no longer a God of just one people and a God of divinely sanctioned violence and war. God was today a God of all people, especially a God of peace, love and non-violence. In this context, it was optimal on the part of the present ruling authority in the holy land, namely the state of Israel, to be led by the eternal principles contained in the Word of God. These principles required a reference to justice and God’s love for all people. God was not a God of just one people and a friend to only one people. God was not on the side of injustice committed against any one people.

Sabbah agreed that it was almost impossible to reconcile the political and military activities undertaken by various temporal powers with the Laws of God given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and the prophetic literature of ancient Israelite seers. He exhorted his readers to distinguish between the religious duties as embodied in the Jewish people and their political survival in a modern nation-state of their own making. He counselled that facts about the right to the land in Palestine must be submitted to the arbitration of International Law. The role of religion in the Israeli-Palestine conflict must be in the role of a moderator concerning the values inherent in all political action. Sabbah argued that whilst Christians accept the Old Testament as a form of revelation, this does not imply that modern Jews had political rights to the land. In his view there was nothing ‘divine’ in the creation of modern Israel, a nation founded by committed secular political Zionists in the colonial settler format.26

Archbishop Elias Chacour: Reconciliation through Education

The life story of Archbishop Elias Chacour of Akko (Acre), Haifa, Nazareth and all Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church of Antioch, resembled that of other Palestinian clerics and ecclesiastics in that he experienced the brutality and oppression of war at first hand as a child. Elias Chacour was born in 1939 in a village in the northern Galilee region of British mandate Palestine. His village was occupied and depopulated in 1948, during the first Israeli-Arab war that resulted in the formation of the state of Israel. Chacour was just a young boy of eight when his family was evicted from their home and became refugees in their own land, which had suddenly become an alien country to them. Chacour was ordained a priest in Nazareth in 1965. He became the first Palestinian and Arab student to get a higher degree from Israel’s elite Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Chacour was a close friend of the late Archbishop Joseph-Marie Raya of the Melkite Catholic Church of Galilee, a fearless Lebanese-American fighter for the rights of the oppressed and the downtrodden, a man who had honed his skills in the Civil Rights struggle of the African-American people (as one of the right-hand men of Martin Luther King himself) in the 1950s and 1960s.

Naim Ateek was the founder and prime mover behind the setting up of the Palestinian Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem in 1989 called Sabeel. He still functions as the director of the Sabeel Centre in Jerusalem. Ateek shared a similar history with Chacour in that he also was an internal refugee created in the war of 1948. He too was influenced by Bishop Raya’s tireless activities on behalf of the Palestinian residents of the state of Israel, during his tenure in the Bishopric of Haifa, Galilee, during the late 1960s and early 70s. However, he also criticized Bishop Raya for a lack of clear vision and strategy to counter the oppression, very clearly evident against the Palestinian residents of the state of Israel, during his tenure in the Galilee Bishopric.27 Chacour served as a vice-president of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation
Theology Centre of Jerusalem. He was among the earliest of educated Palestinian clergy to realize the implicit importance of ecumenical endeavour in the changed and reduced circumstances that Palestinian Christians after 1948. Almost all the rehabilitation and developmental work he led in the northern Galilee was a testament to his appeal to ecumenical endeavour, whether local, international or indeed on an inter-faith level. Elias Michael Chacour was consecrated Archbishop of all Galilee and the Holy Land in 2006 at the Melkite Greek Catholic Cathedral in Haifa.

The Melkites (also called Melchites or Malkites) were those Byzantine Christians that opted to be in communion with the Church of Rome instead of the Eastern Byzantine Orthodox Church based at Constantinople (today’s Istanbul in the Republic of Turkey). It was in 1724 that Rome and the Melkite Christians of the Middle East came into a formal union. The term Melkite comes from the Syriac word Malko which means ‘imperial.’ In Arabic, the term used is Maliki which means the same as the Aramaic-Syriac root word. The Melkite Greek Catholic Church known in Arabic (transliteration) as Kanisat ar-Rum al-Katulik is an Eastern Rite Catholic Church. The original home of the Church lies in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon-Palestine, but members were scattered through out the Western world and the Americas numbering about one and a half million souls globally. The main ethno-linguistic orientation of the Church was Levantine Arab. The Archdiocese of the Galilee, Akko, Haifa and Nazareth was once one of the largest and richest of all Melkite dioceses, but this was no longer the case due to outmigration as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel and the restrictive policies of the Israeli government against non-Jewish minorities.

Rafiq Khoury referred to Chacour’s mode of writing and practice as ‘narrative’ theology. Chacour focussed most of his energies on building up the educational infrastructure of this region, so neglected by the Israeli authorities. He was involved with building up the first Arab Christian University of Israel in Ibillin (the Crusader Ibelin) in the Galilee region. This University was defined as the Mar Elias University Project (MEU). No university was owned or operated solely by Palestinian Arabs in the Arab sector in Israel, nor did the Israeli authorities encourage such private ventures as a threat to the national higher education framework of the state of Israel, as well as a threat to the secular and state monopoly over higher education within the Jewish state.

The main purpose behind the educational institutions founded by Chacour was the desire to see the Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze of Israel, study and cohabit together. Whereas the relationship between the Palestinians and Israelis, whether inside or outside Israel, continued to be tense and confrontational, Chacour hoped that his particular policy of educational co-optation and co-habitation might prove the seed to the solution of this vexed issue. As he commented,

International agreements, the signing of peace treaties between governments and heads of states, had proved to be shaky, superficial, and easily damaged. At heart, they lack roots. They were only signatures on pieces of paper. Through the Mar Elias Educational Institutions, we want to reach agreement in the hearts of the younger generation, the leaders of tomorrow. These roots planted in the hearts of young Jews, Palestinian Christians, and Muslims cannot be easily destroyed.
As can be seen, his was a theology of reconciliation. It was a matter of building bridges among the members of the same family: Christians, Jews, Moslems, and Druze. This was the meaning of ‘becoming Godlike’. Chacour presupposed that liberation could only come through such reconciliation.

Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal (former Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem)

Riah Abu El-Assal was one of the founding members of the Palestinian Liberation Theology movement, but was sidelined from Sabeel because of his inability to get along with Naim Ateek. He was among the few Palestinian Christians who actively got involved in politics in the state of Israel. El-Assal was one of the founding members of the Progressive List for Peace (PLP), a Joint Arab-Jewish party that stood for peace and reconciliation between the Arab and Jewish residents of the state of Israel. This party functioned between 1984 and 1992 and was credited with breaking many taboos, particularly on joint Arab-Jewish political participation, within the Israeli political spectrum. His book ‘Caught in Between,’ (London: SPCK, 1999) was primarily a narrative work of recollection as the author sought to fashion his diverse experiences into a coherent theology of struggle.

This book, in common with many other Palestinian clerical theologians’ works, started with an extensive narrative description of the background and early origins of Palestinian Christians and Christianity in the land that was called ‘holy.’ Most Palestinian theologians devoted considerable space to descriptions and explanations defining their ethnic origins and historic claim to being descendents of the earliest Christians of the land of Palestine. El-Assal too was a refugee in the fighting of 1948, making his way back to Nazareth in the Galilee later after the founding of the state of Israel. He mentioned in his book how Nazareth was full of refugees in his youth from many towns and villages (such as Baysan, from where Ateek came) in the Galilee region that had been evacuated by the Zionist forces.

While both Ateek and El-Assal had more or less the same background, having grown up in Nazareth under the Israeli state, the latter was different in the sense that he opted to live and serve within Israel proper and within the limits imposed by clerical membership within the Episcopal Church in Israel-Palestine. The clashes between Ateek and El-Assal were legion within the small Anglican circles of Palestine. While both were known to have been priests with a radical take on society, it was no secret that El-Assal was preferred for the Bishopric of Jerusalem over the American-educated and better theologically-trained Ateek. Ateek left the pastoral ministry, taking an early and pre-mature retirement and established the Sabeel Centre for Ecumenical Liberation Theology in Jerusalem, almost immediately upon leaving the Church. He was reputedly posted to Nablus in the northern West Bank, immediately on El-Assal taking office, a posting that he was not willing to fulfil, given the then very troubled and war-torn nature of the Nablus area during the period of the first Intifada. Ateek refused this reposting from the relative comfort of his Jerusalem job and resigned.

El-Assal too attempted to emulate Elias Chacour’s activities in the Galilee, by seeking to upgrade the Anglican Christ Church School in Nazareth, the first school started in Nazareth in 1851, into a proposed private Arab University in Nazareth,
again the first of its kind in the region. He had the school and institutions renamed Bishop Riah Educational Campus in Nazareth. The Episcopal Church based in Jerusalem and the present Bishop Suheil Dawani, who succeeded Bishop El-Assal in 2007, waged a bitter legal battle (which had gone all the way to the Israeli High Court) to get the land and school back under the legal and administrative possession of the Jerusalem church. This controversy, not the first in the chequered history of the Anglicans, and particularly the ‘native’ Episcopalians in the Israel-Palestine region, revealed the petty infighting and rivalries-animosities among the Episcopal clerics and church hierarchy in the region.34

Again like Ateek, El-Assal had emphasized on the importance of Christians in the Palestine-Israel region working together in an ecumenical framework, particularly because many of the churches in the region were quite small, numerically and thereby their collective impact on society would be much more than if they worked individually. In this context, he referred in his book to the fact that the Episcopal Church in the Middle East was one of the founding members of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), the regional body of the worldwide ecumenical group known as the World Council of Churches (WCC). El-Assal raised an interesting point towards the end of his book regarding the theological and doctrinal position of the Episcopal-Anglican Church, a church that found itself ‘neither Catholic, nor wholly Protestant,’ thereby enabling them to be a bridge between different branches and wings of the Christian world. This, in turn, would make the Episcopal Church and Anglicans in general in the Middle East to be ideal peace-builders and partners in the process of reconciliation and healing in the land called ‘holy.’35

El-Assal revealed how as a Palestinian Christian, he was often confused by the attitude of the Zionists towards God and the state of Israel. As a secular political ideology in the formation of the state of Israel, Zionist Jews were adept at utilising the ancient promises of God to the Hebrew people for their own political aims and policies. God was made into a ‘real-estate agent’ whose Name could be used to justify the Jewish presence in Israel-Palestine.36 The establishment of the state of Israel was increasingly equated with the fulfilment of prophecy and the ‘renewal of the covenant between God and His Chosen people.’37 El-Assal recounted how the establishment of the state of Israel resulted in an identity crisis for him as well as many other Palestinian Christians, as all Palestinians were identified with ancient Israel’s enemies.38 This problem was a particular spur to the creation of an indigenous Palestinian theology.

The concerns of Palestinian theology

This brief look at some of the main practitioners of theology in Palestine reveals the differences, but even more the overlaps within liberation/contextual theology. These theologians began from the same place, oppression, but the different individual situations and positions meant that they developed in a slightly different way. Uniquely, in Palestine, Christians and Muslims were both part of an oppressed people. Palestinian theologians must understand Islam not as a precondition for mission, but for survival. All of these theologians took the gospel seriously and, in this situation of conflict, their emphasis was on peace and reconciliation, although they recognized the importance of the struggle to be free. For them, non violence and dialogue was the way to liberation.
Notes and References

1 The history and aims of Tantur can be accessed from the website http://come.to/tantur, accessed on February 21, 2008.
10 Geries Khoury, *Olive Tree Theology*, 96.
17 See Tsimhoni, Christian Communities, 191-192.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
33 Information gleaned by this researcher during various conversations between him and Naim Ateek as well as various Sabeel staff members in Jerusalem in August-September 2007.
35 See El-Assal, *Caught in between*, 146.
36 Ibid, 56.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid, 57-58.