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Israel, Palestine, the General Assembly, and personal perception

by Christian T. Iosso

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As Presbyterians, the General Assembly is our continuing symbol of unity as church and the embodiment of the practice of representative government. Our denominational name alone indicates the seriousness with which we take shared leadership and public decision-making. Respect for the General Assembly loosely translates into respect for the whole church as well as a trust that God's Spirit is known not only locally and personally but also globally and in the public arena. Thus it is good to get overtures that put significant issues before the Church through its most encompassing governing body.

As a still-new staff person in Louisville, with work that relates to the social witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I am pleased by the number of overtures coming to this summer's assembly. A quick review of these overtures shows that they fall into several categories, somewhat reflective of the concerns of organized groups within the denomination. Thus we have a number of overtures for and against certain standards for ordination, plus several on marriage and abortion that oppose previous General Assembly stands. Conscience is a major theme of the Peace, Unity, and Purity report, as it has been in relation to problem pregnancies and several other issues both personal and social. One of the strengths of that Task Force's work is its not limiting conscience to an un-Reformed image of purity; another strength is simply in its taking enough length to lay out its arguments fully before the commissioners.

Blessing even while disagreeing

In a sound-bite culture, where dumbed-down material is too often fed to numbed-out consumers, a Presbyterian General Assembly is quite a unique event. At its best, the General Assembly is a place of blessing and recognition, where fine work from across the church can be lifted up, new servants commissioned, and the whole church encouraged. It may be a stretch, but I think there is still something of an Arthurian round table in the deliberation and liturgy of bringing matters not simply before a metaphorical king and queen but before a *council*, before a whole assembly joined at the heart. Naturally, when we struggle amongst ourselves over issues, especially over the vocations of other Christians, it can seem that disorder, contention and tragedy are more present than peace, unity, or purity.

Part of the blessing of Presbyterianism, however, is that we honor each other through an organized, though sometimes excruciatingly long, process of listening and voting. We are majorities and minorities at a particular moment in time more than we are winners and losers. This is why, I believe, the General Assembly can take the prophetic stances it so often has. There is a kind of empathy and understanding that exists within the church, even in areas of disagreement. With the Holy Spirit's help, the exercise of power in the Church is not a zero-sum game.

Personal loyalties and justice narratives

Given this, let me explore a bit the overtures that seek to overturn the 216th General Assembly's action to explore "phased, selective divestment" from corporations doing business with Israel. As a denomination, we have long voiced concerns about Israel's occupation of Palestine. What this action did was to move these concerns into the arena of corporate social responsibility. And what we have experienced in response to this action since the end of the 2004 Assembly is the collision of two social justice narratives, with personal loyalties attached to both.

Admittedly, our personal loyalties and lifestyles are challenged in most social justice issues. In this case, however, Palestinian claims about realities in the Middle East conflict with security claims and anxieties about acceptance closer to home.

Much in this action IS NOT NEW. For one, there is the use of "mission responsibility through investment (MRTI)," even though some Presbyterians and many Jews are unaware of the efforts of religious investors to influence the practices of corporations for the greater good through dialogue and stockholder actions. Many Protestant denominations and Roman Catholic orders have been trying to align their institutional portfolios ("money") with their proclamations ("mouth") since the early 1970s. Over several decades, international issues such as infant formula marketing, environmental protection, and human rights have been addressed through global strategies involving religious and other institutions in many countries.

In the case of apartheid in South Africa, many Reformed Christian activists understood that it was our particular responsibility to try to change the *hearts*, as well as the *behavior*, of our brother and sister Calvinists in the White population. Without validating their moral narrative, we felt a personal, confessional connection with them. Many of us believe that we saw, through such methods as economic pressure from outside and suffering witness from within, the power of nonviolent Christianity vindicated in God's deliverance of South Africa from a race war. Certainly there were and still are painful analogies in South Africa to our own mixed record on civil rights and economic empowerment of the poor in the United States, but again, through the church-wide and internationally-aware framework of the General Assembly, Presbyterians could affirm and act on a universalistic vision of justice for all.

What is new? It is personal in a different way, and it was linked to personal insecurity. As has been observed, most Presbyterians know Jews and many are related to them. Thus we feel at close range the inner struggle of U.S. Jews to deal with a narrative of victimization different from their own. And we hear their voices more clearly than we hear the voices of the almost-extinct Arab Christian communities of the Middle East. When we, as Presbyterians, are criticized for listening to those voices, and perhaps even those of Arab Muslims, we have to make moral choices about our loyalty and our identity.

While I share some of the same personal loyalties that animate opposition to the Assembly's position, I find that this is a place where peacemaking and conflict-avoidance can be very different things.

The claims of history on perception

Having lived most of my life in the New York suburbs, and having served as a pastor there, I can claim to know something about the story of Jewish oppression and resulting wariness. I feel guilt at how badly Christians have treated Jews and other minorities in the past, and I am proud that my father was one of millions of Christians who fought against Hitler. In my former congregation, we removed historic, but swastika-like, crosses from our chapel, acknowledging the indelible association those symbols have with the Holocaust and the

continuing menace of anti-Semitism. Questions of intermarriage (widespread in my congregations and region) and other, very personal, matters abound; I will illustrate with one.

In late 1998, I received shocking news. My father had not simply been a prisoner of war during World War II, but that because he was one of about 350 Allied POWs made into slave laborers at Berga am Elster—a satellite camp of Buchenwald, where about a fifth died near the end of the war—he had been classified as a Holocaust survivor. [Two books were published on this group in 2005; a brief description of Berga am Elster can be found on www.pbs.org/net/berga.] No wonder we had always been taught that anti-Semitism was a major sin; we had not understood how closely our family's history had been entwined with the suffering of those many Jews and others worked to death when they weren't killed outright.

This identity for my father as a “survivor” was startling and new, and it prompted my brothers and me to press my father to speak at last about things he had simply never discussed. And through these conversations, certain things, such as ways of coping with stress that had sometimes caused their own stress, in much the same ways that Jewish survivor families have experienced, began to make sense. It also prompted deeper admiration of my father, most acutely when we were sent pictures of my father with other skeletal men at the camp's liberation. By the grace of God I was able to pick out my father, lying on a stretcher at less than a hundred pounds, from among the twelve other men in a photo from 53 years before.

Personal perceptions in perspective

As I sat in a joint meeting of the Societies of Jewish and Christian Ethics two months ago, I thought about how personal all these associations are. The Society of Jewish Ethics had invited Dr. Marc Ellis, a well-known critic of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, to speak. Responses were to be given by another Jewish ethicist and a Roman Catholic priest who has led efforts to honor Holocaust victims and end anti-Semitism. Talk about personal! Marc Ellis was basically charged with betraying his heritage for personal benefit of one kind or another. The Jewish respondent invoked lost family members and the communal lessons she drew from that. The Roman Catholic priest acknowledged that Palestinians had suffered injustices, but he defended his life work as supporting real reconciliation between Jews and Christians. The question and answer period went long and reflected well, both self-critically and defensively, upon the ability of the gathered ethicists to face a tough issue. And yes, Ellis did defend the PC(USA) divestment decision.

The call of God to each of us is personal. God creates our personalities through our relationships, and God speaks to the corporate Christian conscience of congregations and of the General Assembly. Presbyterians differ personally and even viscerally on the question of whether or not God's voice was in that strong majority vote for “divestment” in 2004. Those who judge it to be a brave witness also know that it was not a perfect witness. Issues are rarely black and white. “More study” can always be called for, and more study is always needed, though it can be used as a shield to keep us from acting. [The possibility of divestment is, in fact, part of every shareholder responsibility action, as the 1984 Divestment study notes (Minutes, 1984:193-206).]

Was the action of that last General Assembly supported by the kind of comprehensive study that the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy is known for? No, for it came as a relatively brief overture from a session and a presbytery. Nevertheless, it was dependent on extensive previous studies, decades of resolutions and policies on the Middle East and peacemaking, and the consistent pattern of Presbyterian priority for the perceived underdog. In the 2004 context, too, the Assembly understood that Palestinian land and hope were steadily being eroded by the “security fence,” and the Assembly had already criticized the Iraq war, in even stronger language, as “unwise, unjust and immoral.” It may be that the Israeli/Palestinian issue can no longer be separated from larger Middle East dynamics unleashed, in part, by the Iraq war and contributing, in part, to it.

Every one of us has family stories of suffering and loss that are connected to our perspectives on issues, though not always predictably so. Given the intensity of the Middle East-related discussion, I have felt it important to provide an example of the kind of personal listening we, as staff, are all doing, for we are not of one mind or experience on this or any issue that comes before the church. Four months into my work in Louisville, I find that the staff role and the pastoral role, though they are different, are closer callings than many might think.

Christian T. Iosso, formerly a New York pastor, is coordinator of the PC(USA)'s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP).