

‘Fundies’ Howl War, But Main Churches Call for End to Israel’s Occupation

by Edward Spannaus

The U.S. news media have obsessed on every twist and turn of the pedophilia scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, and Congress is bowing and scraping before the lunatic “Christian Zionists” who demand that that Ariel Sharon be given a free hand to “ethnically cleanse” Palestinians from the “Covenant Land.” But the press has all but ignored the many calls for Israel to withdraw, and moves for Middle East peace, coming from the Catholic and “mainstream” Protestant churches.

As many observers have recently noted—as if discovering something new—the so-called “Christian Right” in the United States is the Israeli Likud party’s key point of leverage in the U.S., and particularly within the Republican Party. But that point was made already over a year and one-half ago, in an article by Lyndon LaRouche republished in *EIR*’s Special Report “Who Is Sparking a Religious War in the Middle East?”—where LaRouche wrote: “These so-called ‘fundies,’ the glassy-eyed so-called ‘millenarians,’ not the American Jews, provide the decisive margin of driving force behind the impetus for religious war in the Middle East.”

The backdrop for the current mobilization of the so-called Christian Right, was provided in great depth in that *EIR Special Report*, and we will update that picture of the latter-day Bogomils and Cathars—the American Buggers, they could be called—in a forthcoming issue of *EIR*. Here, we will look at a little-noticed aspect of this, the opposition to this drive for religious war among the mainline churches in the United States, which is, for the most part, blacked out of the news media.

Likud’s American Allies

The Israeli occupation of Arab lands as a result of the 1967 war was opposed by many U.S. churches, particularly the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and mainline Protestant churches. (At that point, 20% of the Palestinian population was Christian.) The Likud lobby in the United States, represented by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), therefore began cultivating so-called Evangelical Christians, and when Likud came to power in Israel in 1977, it immediately went to work to mobilize evangelicals in

America—against President Carter’s statements in support of a Palestinian homeland, and against a proposed UN Middle East Peace Conference.

Likud’s parody of Biblical themes—claiming that God gave the land occupied by the Palestinians exclusively to the Jews, and that the Jews have a divine right to settle anywhere in Eretz Israel—was opportunistically applauded by the Christian Zionists of various “dispensationalist” and “millennialist” strains, as consistent with their own distorted theology and Biblical interpretation. That reading is that the re-establishment of Biblical Israel is a fulfillment of prophecy, portending the second coming of Jesus Christ.

When Likud came to power again in 1996 with Benjamin Netanyahu’s victory, Netanyahu moved quickly to mobilize the American Christian Right, including bringing evangelical and fundamentalist leaders to Israel for a tour and conference at which they pledged their support for the Likud agenda. The same crowd, exemplified by the Jerry Falwell-Pat Robertson axis, were of course some of the most vocal in screaming about the Clinton “sex scandals”—in large part, to derail his Middle East peace efforts.

In recent weeks, this gang has been mobilizing full tilt, in support of the bloody Israeli invasion of the West Bank. As Secretary of State Colin Powell was heading to the Middle East on April 11, a group led by Jerry Falwell and Gary Bauer sent a letter to President Bush, demanding that his Administration “end pressure” on Sharon to withdraw from the West Bank. Falwell ordered his followers to flood the White House with calls and e-mails, and, the next day (as reported by *Time* magazine), senior Presidential aides called Falwell to reassure him that President Bush stood firmly behind Sharon.

Meanwhile, what were the other Christian churches, in the United States and in the Middle East, doing?

Mainstream Opposition to the Occupation

Amidst the howling and barking of these Likudnik “Elmer Gantry,” the mainstream churches have been quietly—generally, too quietly—opposing the Israeli invasion and occupation of the Palestinian territories, and decrying the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) siege of the Church of the Nativity in

Bethlehem and the attacks on other Christian churches in the Palestinian areas.

On April 2, at the beginning of the siege of the Church of the Nativity, the nine Patriarchs, Archbishops, and Heads of all the Christian Churches in Jerusalem issued a joint statement calling on President Bush “to stop the inhuman tragedy that is taking place in this Holy Land,” citing the siege of the Church of the Nativity, and the invasion and damaging of other religious institutions by the Israelis. Those signing represented the Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and the various Orthodox Churches.

On April 13, those same leaders met with Secretary of State Powell, and presented him with an open letter which strongly criticized the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and the recent Israeli military invasion. “The Palestinian/Israeli conflict is not a mere question of violence,” the letter stated. “Violence is only a symptom of the root cause of the Middle East conflict, namely, the Israeli occupation of the 1967 territories.” They called for an end to the occupation, the dismantling of the Israeli settlements, and addressing the right of return for displaced Palestinians.

The National Council of Churches in the United States dispatched a delegation of 13 American church leaders to the Mideast on April 16-27. They urged the Israeli government to cooperate with the UN investigation of events in Jenin, and objected to the withholding of food, water, and medical supplies from the Church of the Nativity. The group, which also delivered humanitarian supplies, included United Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Armenian Orthodox, National Baptist, and Syrian Orthodox leaders.

They issued a seven-point statement which includes calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, the cessation of building Israeli settlements, dismantling most of the existing settlements, and addressing the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

What the Churches Are Saying

Catholic: The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Wilton D. Gregory, issued a statement in early April calling for an immediate cease-fire and a return to negotiations, saying that only negotiations “can lead to an end to violence and occupation, a secure state for Israel and a viable state for Palestinians.” It urged the U.S. government “to use every means to persuade leaders on both sides” to turn away from violence, and called for rapid withdrawal of Israeli troops from the West Bank.

Episcopal: Frank T. Griswold, Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church U.S.A., also issued a statement in early April calling for the immediate intervention of the international community, the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force into the occupied territories, and implementation of the Tenet plan and the Mitchell Report. Bishop Griswold also stated: “The Arab League’s willingness to engage the

peace process with an offer of normal relations in exchange for a Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders is precedent setting, even breathtaking, and the moment must not be lost.”

Lutheran: The Presiding Bishop of the 5 million-member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), sent out a statement on April 4, ordering it to be read at *every* ELCA congregation on Sunday, April 7. The statement called upon President Bush and Secretary of State Powell “to use their great influence to halt this dreadful and violent situation” in the “occupied territories of the West Bank.” A statement issued by the ELCA Church Council on April 6 called for the establishment of an international peacekeeping force, the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Palestinian-controlled areas, and an end to the occupation.

On April 26, the newspaper of the conservative, 2.5 million-member Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the United States, ran a story headlined “Israeli Troops Caused \$250,000 Damage to Church, Academy,” referring to the Lutheran church and school near the Church of the Nativity; an earlier press release described how Israeli troops had used a Lutheran pastor in Ramallah as a “human shield” while searching his church.

Presbyterian: The Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), issued a statement on April 5, which stated: “For the sake of peace and justice, the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip must come to an end. We decry the continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories by the Israeli government, and the terror inflicted upon the Palestinian people through Israel’s repeated military incursions into Palestinian towns and villages.”

The statement noted that since 1967, the Presbyterian Church has called for the recognition of Israel’s right to exist, the right of the Palestinian people to a sovereign Palestinian state, and that the church body has “repeatedly called for an end of the Israeli occupation, a halting of the building and expansion of Israeli settlements and colonies based on confiscated Palestinian land, a halt of the continuing humiliation and degradation of the Palestinian people. . . .”

Methodist: The United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a statement in early May, decrying the escalation of violence and the siege of the Church of the Nativity. The Council of Bishops stated that they, among other things:

- “deplore the disproportionate use of force on the part of the Israeli government,” citing the use of tanks and helicopters to attack civilian neighborhoods, etc.
- “request Israel immediately withdraw from all invaded and occupied Palestinian territory, cease its military incursions, stop the building and expansion of settlements, address the right of return for Palestinian refugees, halt its destruction of the infrastructure of Palestinian civil society.”
- “commend Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the recent Arab Summit for putting forward a plan for peace with Israel. . . .”