

EXTRACTS FROM A SPEECH BY PRESIDENT NELSON MANDELA,

The temptation in our situation is to speak in muffled tones about an issue such as the right of the people of Palestine to a state of their own. Having achieved our own freedom, we can fall into the trap of washing our hands of difficulties that others face.

Yet we would be less than human if we did so.

... our own experience taught us that the pursuit of human fraternity and equality - irrespective of race or religion - should stand at the centre of our peaceful endeavours. The choice is not between freedom and justice, on the one hand, and their opposite, on the other. Peace and prosperity; tranquility and security are only possible if these are enjoyed by all without discrimination.

... we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians;

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to these Palestinian and Israeli leaders. In particular, we pay homage to the memory of Yitshak Rabin who paid the supreme sacrifice in pursuit of peace. These soldiers of peace recognise that the world we live in is rising above the trappings of religious and racial hatred and conflict... that the spurning of agreements reached in good faith and the forceful occupation of land can only fan the flames of conflict... that it is in a situation such as this, that extremists on all sides thrive, fed by the blood lust of centuries gone by.

These Palestinian and Israeli campaigners for peace know that security for any nation is not abstract; neither is it exclusive. It depends on the security of others; it depends on mutual respect and trust. Indeed, these soldiers of peace know that their destiny is bound together, and that none can be at peace while others wallow in poverty and insecurity.

We must make our voices heard calling for stronger action by world bodies as well as those states that have the power, to act with the same enthusiasm in dealing with this deadlock as they do on other problems in the Middle East.

Yes, all of us need to do more in supporting the struggle of the people of Palestine for self-determination; in supporting the quest for peace, security and friendship in this region.



Nelson Mandela

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AUSTRALIA'S PRIME MINISTER, BONHOEFFER, the HOLOCAUST and PALESTINIANS



Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia

In October 2006 for an Australian magazine, The Monthly, Kevin Rudd, then Leader of the Opposition and now Prime Minister (from November 2007), wrote:

One of those honoured above the Great West Door (of Westminster Abbey) is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, pastor and peace activist. Bonhoeffer is, without doubt, the man I admire most in the history of the twentieth century. He was a man of faith. He was a man of reason. He was a man of letters who was as well read in history and literature as he was in the intensely academic Lutheran theology of the German university tradition. He was never a nationalist, always an internationalist. And above all, he was a man of action who wrote prophetically in 1937 that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." For Bonhoeffer, whatever the personal cost, there was no moral alternative other than to fight the Nazi state with whatever weapons were at his disposal.

This article was a significant theological engagement on the part of an Australian politician. It invoked the legacy of one of the giants of 20th century theology as an inspiration and guiding voice for his own politics and Christian discipleship. Just over a year later Kevin Rudd was elected Australia's Prime Minister. After two years in this role we felt it was appropriate to look at his actions to see if they matched his words, particularly in the major issues of justice and peace on which Bonhoeffer spoke so fearlessly.

In 2008 on the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the State of Israel Prime Minister Rudd expressed unqualified admiration for Israel. A few months later the Israeli Defence Forces were pounding the Gaza Strip.

Does Mr Rudd's support of Israel include Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people which includes significant numbers of his fellow Christians living in both Gaza and the West Bank, who live in the same oppressive conditions as their Muslim neighbours?

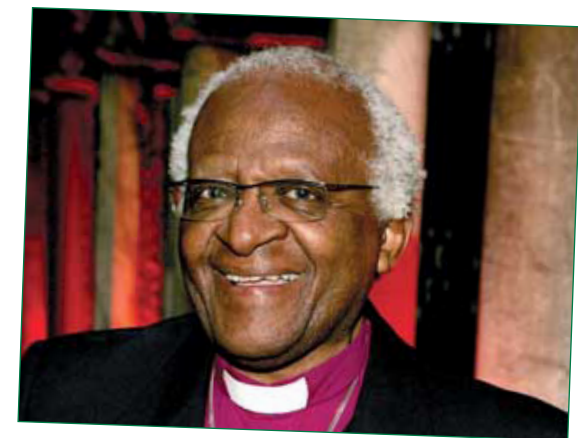
Unlike some who see it as political posturing, we acknowledge that Mr Rudd's engagement with Bonhoeffer is very important to him and does influence his politics. But it is sometimes easy to see your heroes against the background of their own time and how they dealt with yesterday's issues rather than take their principles and courage into the great issues of today.

We asked Emeritus Professor John de Gruchy, the eminent South African theologian and international authority on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to give his analysis of how Bonhoeffer would assess the current Israel-Palestine situation.

We hope it may help Mr Rudd follow closely his hero. It should also be a reminder to all people, particularly Christians, never to forget the Holocaust as an appalling example what a "civilized" nation can do, even in the 21st century, to those it considers second-class citizens.



Rev James Barr
Chair, Major Issues And Theology Foundation
Senior Minister, Canberra Baptist Church



Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Christian Prime Minister Rudd on 26 November 2009 welcomes to Australia alleged war criminal and Israeli Prime Minister during the onslaught on Gaza, Ehud Olmert

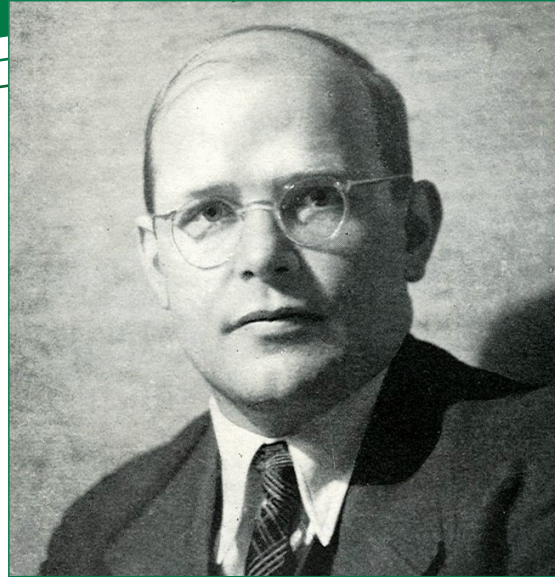


Christian former US President Jimmy Carter: *'The blockade of Gaza has brought death, destruction, pain and suffering to the people there. The international community must not ignore their cries for help.'*



BONHOEFFER AND THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT

South African Reflections



Politicians seldom quote theologians to support their policies, but in recent times some have elicited the support of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who died at the hands of the Gestapo in Hitler's Germany. Most notoriously, George W. Bush claimed Bonhoeffer's support for going to war against Iraq. From what I hear, Bonhoeffer's name has also been exploited in Australian politics in recent times, though I confess that my knowledge of what goes on "down under" is somewhat limited to rugby and cricket. But I pricked up my ears when I heard your Prime Minister's statements praising Israel.

I have been reflecting for virtually a life-time on Bonhoeffer's legacy and find that he continues to speak to us today, and I am not adverse to drawing on his testimony within the political arena, quite the contrary. We did that in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Bonhoeffer was a serious challenge to those of us who are white because though he too was privileged by background, he took the side of the victims of racism and injustice. I suspect it was for such reasons that I was asked to reflect on how Bonhoeffer might have responded to the present-day Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and especially the plight of the Palestinians. This is certainly a thought-provoking question because in his life-time Bonhoeffer was one of a handful of Protestant theologians in Nazi Germany who spoke out on behalf of the Jews. In his context, they were the victims, so it was the "Jewish question," as it was called, not the Palestinian one that demanded his attention.

"...he took the side of the victims of racism and injustice."

Although murdered by the regime because of his involvement in the 20th July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer was initially arrested because he was suspected of helping Jews escape the clutches of the Gestapo. Whatever his somewhat traditional views about Judaism in relation to Christianity, there can be no doubt about his concern for the plight of the Jews.

Unsurprisingly Bonhoeffer's legacy played a significant role after the Second World War in re-shaping of Christian theology in the light of the Holocaust or Shoah. His critique of the idolatries of Christendom and his affirmation of the suffering of God in solidarity with humanity and especially the victims of injustice, challenged Christians to radically re-think their faith and role in the world. As a young theologian I was nurtured in those discussions. Only much later, after a visit to Israel in 1970, did I also become aware of the "Palestinian question," and began to ponder how Bonhoeffer might have responded given the way in which he responded to the victimization of the Jews in his own day. And, of course, I could not avoid relating it all to what was happening in apartheid South Africa at the same time.

Having visited Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Flossenburg (where Bonhoeffer died) concentration camps; having spent many hours in several Holocaust museums from Jerusalem to Washington, from Berlin and Prague to Cape Town; and having been involved in lengthy discussions with Jewish scholars about the Holocaust, I am only too aware of the horrors unleashed by Christian anti-Semitism in the course of history. And I am disturbed by the rabid anti-Semitic rhetoric of militant Muslims whether on the air waves broadcast from Scandinavia or from the current President of Iran, as I am horrified by suicide bombers. I am also aware that there is sometimes a thin dividing line between anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, and anti-Zionism, and that given the legacy of Christendom from Constantine to the Holocaust, Christians, especially those in the West, need to be cautious in casting stones or pointing fingers.

In view of this history, it was with a heavy heart that Desmond Tutu likened the treatment of Palestinians to the way in which blacks were treated in apartheid South Africa. He is not alone in holding this view; it is one shared by Nelson Mandela and others who have, at the same time, shown deep respect for the Jewish community in South Africa. It is also shared, from my knowledge, by many Jews whose sense of justice and commitment to human rights has also been violated by the way in which Palestinians have been and are being treated, and who see their compatriots becoming psychologically damaged, if not brutalized and killed, by the ongoing strife. I have listened to the testimonies of Palestinian Christians who, with great sadness mixed with anger, have told of the ways in which they have suffered as a result of Israeli policies and actions, and I have seen young Israelis treat aged Palestinians with a disdain and contempt that reminds me of my own South African past.

Towards the end of his life, I raised the "Palestinian question" with Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's close confidant and biographer who, during the nineteen-seventies and eighties took a leading role in redefining Christian thinking and action in the light of the Shoah. Bethge remained committed to his views on Christian-Jewish relations, which called for a decisive re-think on the part of Christians. But as his life drew to a close in the nineteen-nineties, he was becoming increasingly concerned about the situation in the Middle East. I believe that he, along with Bonhoeffer, would be even more deeply disturbed by the recent developments resulting from the Israeli continued occupation of the West Bank and the recent war on Gaza. This would not have meant any lessening of their commitment to the victims of the Holocaust and their descendants, but it posed a very serious question: who is now the victim?

It is not too difficult to surmise what Bonhoeffer's answer would be if we take his legacy seriously. Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the victims of injustice whoever they might be, and his preparedness to speak out and act where possible on their behalf, is unequivocal. Listen to what he wrote shortly before his arrest:

"... we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering."

In his day, this described the plight of the Jews; in our day, within the Middle East it chiefly, if not only, describes the plight of the Palestinians.

No one can deny the complexity of the situation in the Middle East, which has defied political resolution for so long. There are many sides to the story, and even if we are inclined to do so, it is unhelpful to place the blame on any one side to the exclusion of others, as if this will resolve the problem. But does this mean that we, especially if we claim to be inspired by Bonhoeffer, should remain silent about the current suffering of the Palestinian people, and the injustices and indignities that they daily face? This would surely not have been condoned by the ancient Hebrew prophets for whom justice and mercy, not least for the "stranger," were essential to the well-being of Israel itself. Like his favourite prophet Jeremiah, I think Bonhoeffer would have wept as many others do over the tragedy that keeps unfolding in the Holy Land.

There were many reasons why apartheid was defeated. But two are particularly worth recalling by way of conclusion. In the end, apartheid collapsed when it became clear to those whites in power that it was not in their own self-interest to perpetuate by force what was clearly an unjust system of oppression, and when black leaders extended the hand of reconciliation to their former oppressors, recognizing that without this there could be no lasting peace but only increasing hostility and violence. The pathway from those heady days of transition which began with the release of Mandela has not always been easy, and there is no guarantee in this life of eternal peace, but the alternative was, as one South African president declared, *"too ghastly to contemplate."*

Whatever the faults of the Palestinians, or the justified fears of the Israelis, it should surely be obvious to all but the most stubborn and blind, that as the Hebrew prophet Hosea told ancient Israel that if *"you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind."*

John W. de Gruchy, Emeritus Professor,
University of Cape Town, September 2009

