

THE AWKWARD SILENCE IN THE CHURCH

*“Palcoria Jesusequitur”**

I’ve often wondered what would’ve happened if I had brought my grandfather, my father’s father, to church with me one day. What would my Bible-believing, Christ-affirming, Bush-defending brothers and sisters do if I were to have walked in with this proud, mountain of a man clothed in his distinctly Levantine Arab dress, flowing head scarf and all. My grandfather did not speak English but, like all good Muslims, he would’ve been pleased to spend time in the house of God and worship with us even though we had huge differences in the way we submitted to and honored Him.

But it would’ve been hard for my Christian friends. They are good people. They love God and seek to follow Him in the ways they’ve understood following Him to be. They also love me, and would never intentionally try to hurt me or cause me pain. And yet, a big part of me—the fact that I’m Palestinian—is rarely acknowledged or addressed among my Christian friends. I am also part Costa Rican. But being a Latina in California is not an oddity and definitely not a stumbling block for the church. What do you do, though, with someone who hails from a people in constant and direct enmity with the Jews, the “People of God”?

I remember very early in my walk with Christ when a more mature friend told me that the Jews were God’s chosen people and that now, as a Christian, I was going to have to accept it. But more than mere acceptance, as a good Christian I was also going to have to “bless” them so that God, too, would bless me. Because we know that all who curse Israel would be cursed.

Yet I struggled. I loved my newfound Savior but I also loved and cared for the Palestinian people. How could I reconcile my friend’s words and my experiences with the God that I had found and loved through Jesus Christ? I had lived in the Occupied West Bank. I had seen the brutality of some of the Israeli soldiers. I had witnessed the systematic expropriation of home, land, and livelihood being quietly conducted against all Geneva Convention rules of war. Was this how a people of God would live and govern? How was it that I was supposed to bless and support that which did not honor Him or in any way reflect the words spoken by the prophet Micah: “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God”?

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And yet, the people in my broader Christian community saw no double-standard. A pact had been made: we would have our grand story of the return of the Jews to the Holy Land, fulfilling prophecy and therefore hastening the return of Christ; and they would have their *carte blanche* to build a nation based solely on one's ethnic Jewishness.

As the daughter of a fiercely loyal Palestinian, I acknowledge that my views and perceptions are biased against the methods that were used to establish the state of Israel. In this case, there is probably no one with clean hands: be it the European or American forces that partitioned the land initially, the early Zionists who practiced terrorism as a part of their efforts to secure statehood, or even the Palestinians for their naiveté in not seeing the growing immigration of European Jews as the eventual threat that it became.

Yet, my charge is not against any of these worldly players, for their standards are different than ours. Instead, my charge is against the church for her noticeable silence despite the obvious injustices that have occurred in the land. As the children of God, we owe an apology to the Palestinian people for sitting by and not acknowledging the wrongs committed against them by those we have agreed to protect, "God's Chosen People."

I am not suggesting that we would, as a result of our apology, simultaneously be required to provide an answer to the situation or to enter the fray as mediators between the two troubled sides. The problems are so complex that much more will be required to pave the way for what might be perceived as a fair and just solution for both peoples.

Anyone burned by the sins of another (be they sins of commission or sins of omission) longs to know that someone, anyone, is willing to stand with you and to acknowledge your claims of injustice as legitimate. This is what the Palestinian people, like all normal people, long to hear. I am simply asking that we consider what would happen if the Church bravely stepped into this role. Imagine for just a moment what it might look like if the Church sought the forgiveness of the Palestinians for standing by while they suffered oppression and humiliation at the hands of a nation that we supported and whose actions we too often condoned. I am not advocating an end to U.S. support for Israel. I am not urging us to rebuff our Israeli friends. Nor am I calling us to embrace blindly all the demands and expectations of the Palestinians. I'm calling for the first steps of reconciliation.

But our apologies would not end there. To allow complete cleansing and restoration, we would also want to seek the forgiveness of our Israeli friends for not supporting them in the way of righteousness, in the way of the Father, who would call the nation of Israel to a higher standard, to a moral high ground, which would result in blessing for both the occupier and the occupied. Instead, in our silence, in our rush to see prophecy fulfilled we have chosen to look away, leaving the

nation without moral accountability in how it exercises its might in the region. Is this how we look after our "brother"?

For me, the greatest irony (or tragedy) in this situation, which I'm sure is not at all lost on the watching Arab Muslim population, is that even though thousands upon thousand of Christians make pilgrimage to this holy and divided land, rarely do these usually-American believers seek out the really faithful, the Palestinian Christians who live under a relentless state of oppression, humiliation, and terror, amid the very ruins tourists trek to see. How is it that so many of the Church's trusted leaders can take their flock and travel to this obviously troubled land and not be aware of or acknowledge the Christ-followers living a stone's throw away in the occupied territories. As fellow believers, how would they not be interested in meeting these brethren and hearing their stories, even if it's just to say, "We know you exist, that you have great needs, and we will pray for you"? Is that not what we would desire to hear from our brethren if we, too, found ourselves in a similar desperate situation?

As an extreme example of this same indifference, I remember working in a bank while I was in college and speaking with a customer who happened to be a pastor of a small church outside of San Diego. We had been discussing the first war in Iraq and how from the U.S. perspective, things had gone frustratingly from bad to worse in our dealings with Saddam Hussein, who was still ruler at the time. This pastor said that with the power and might of our government, we should be able to go in and blow everyone up to teach Saddam a lesson.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt and thinking he probably did not know that there were believers in the Middle East, I told him that there were many Christian communities in Iraq and that it would be virtually impossible to do what he proposed without harming the Christians living there. To my astonishment, and dismay, he replied that it was unfortunate (I believe his exact words were "It's too bad"), but sometimes you had to do things like this in a time of war.

What causes this disconnect? Why are we silent about the situations that some of our brethren find themselves in, especially in the Middle East? Why does there seem to be for American Christians a greater affinity with America than with our Christian brethren? As I look around me, and see the growing polarization in this country between Christians and non-Christians, many times it seems that the Church is more concerned with what is in America's interest rather than with what is in Christ's interest. Where is our allegiance primarily? Are we Americans who happen to be Christian or are we Christians who happen to be American?

Something in me died the day I heard that pastor respond as he did. Or perhaps it just receded into the back of my subconscious. Either way, a tacit vow was made and from that day forward, unless I was specifically asked about the situation, which was very rare indeed, I would not bring it up or try to address it. I had learned that the average evangelical conservative Christians among whom I fel-

lowshipped and who were my friends, were probably not going to know what to do with the story of on-going struggles my friends and family were going through in the West Bank. Nor would they completely know how to empathize with me and my struggle to fit in as a Palestinian-American Christian in the American Church today. As I mentioned earlier, this is not because my friends are or were without compassion or love. I think instead that the Church's fascination with Israel and her role in the end times are significantly responsible for most of this silence.

Whatever the reason, conservative churches in the U.S. have generally acted as if questioning the behavior of the state of Israel somehow displeases God. Individual Christians might not always know why they should support Israel, unequivocally, but somehow they go on without questioning. Some are on the extreme end of this and espouse a theology that links a person's salvation to how he or she treats Israel. Others even go so far as to say that because Jews fall under a different and separate covenant, they are not in need of saving faith and to evangelize them would be a waste of time. These are definitely extremes. However, for the majority of us, we just remain silent because we really know precious little about theology and how God has worked through the ages and what and how He has spoken for today. And our unchallenged, awkward silence leaves our Middle Eastern brethren in their pain and Middle Eastern Muslims confused about Christian commitment to justice. What if we broke the silence?