

Open Letter to the Iona Community in Response to your Statement re: Israel/Palestine

In light of the unity that should exist between brothers and sisters in Christ, it is with a sense of sadness that we feel it necessary to respond to your statement on the situation in Israel.

What you refer to as a 'settler colonial project' was an international mandate to establish a national homeland for the Jewish people. That mandate recognised the need for such a homeland after the Jews had suffered persecution in many countries for many centuries. Even during the mandate period their suffering increased, culminating in the Holocaust - the darkest period in human history.

If Britain should apologise for anything, it should not be the Balfour Declaration, but their dreadful mistreatment of the Jews during the mandate period, repeatedly disarming Jewish communities and leaving them to suffer at the hands of their Arab neighbours, as in the Hebron massacre in 1929.

We too long for a just peace in the Middle East. But when we consider the vast territories occupied by Arab nations, it seems totally unjust that the Arabs wish to deny the Jews such a small territory as Israel for their homeland. It also seems unjust that Christians should seek to support the Arabs in denying the Jews their ancient homeland, when our Lord and Saviour was born a Jew and conducted most of his ministry in the land of Israel, repeatedly referring to it as 'Israel'.

Your statement appears to attribute the suffering of the Arab Christians solely to the presence of the Jews, rather than acknowledging the oppression by their own leaders in Fatah and Hamas. Your statement makes no mention of the wicked incitement to acts of terrorism by those Arab leaders, nor of the despicable teaching of very young Arab children to hate Jews and kill them. Nor does it mention the diversion of building materials to construct terror tunnels rather than rebuild the homes of ordinary people in the Gaza Strip. We appeal to you to adopt a more balanced perspective.

Your statement also lacks any indication of the fact that about 1.8 million Arabs live amongst the 6.4 million Jews in Israel. The vast majority of these Arabs are content to live in Israel, recognising that they have a much better standard of living than many others in the region. A recent survey showed that 78% of Jews and 60.5% of Arabs categorize their personal situation as "good" or "very good." (*Israeli Democracy Institute survey, published December 2016*)

We commend you for acknowledging the need to scrutinise Christian theology and repent of any legitimacy it may give to anti-Semitism. But it is action that is needed on this matter, not simply acknowledgement of the need. Far too many churches in the UK are in denial about their anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviour. So please press on with that scrutiny and repentance.

You claim to oppose any theology which provides justification for the exclusive right of any group of people to the land. Yet you support a group of people that wants to remove all Jews from the land. Surely that is a completely contradictory stance.

Your assertion that Christian Zionism is a distortion of the Christian faith is not correct. We cannot claim to speak for all Christian Zionists, but first and foremost we are Christians. We firmly believe that it is God himself who has drawn many of the Jewish people back to the land of Israel, as he declared he would many centuries before the actual events (see, for example, Ezekiel chapter 36). This does not mean that we think God approves of everything that has happened in the process of that return. There has been wrongdoing by all groups involved.

The failure of attempts to negotiate a peace agreement has often resulted from Arab rejection of the final proposals. On a number of occasions Arab leaders seem to have changed their minds when they came away from the negotiations. It has become clear that they simply want to drive the Jews out of the area completely. Even now the Arab leaders are continuing to decline the invitation to take part in direct negotiations with the Israelis.

Furthermore, the area you refer to as the 'West Bank' is better described as disputed territory rather than occupied territory. It was part of the territory mandated to Israel that was illegally annexed by Jordan in the 1948 war, when five Arab armies attacked the newly-formed state of Israel. The fact that the Israelis have shown any willingness to relinquish some of that territory is an indication of the strength of their desire for peace.

If you genuinely repudiate entirely the use of violence, we think you should join us in encouraging the UK government to cease providing aid money that is being misused to support terrorism.

And if you genuinely desire peace, we think that you should cease your support of boycotts, because a genuine peace agreement will require the willing acceptance of both sides. A lasting peace will not result from grudging agreement from people who are pressurised into accepting unfavourable terms. Boycotts and sanctions produce more resentment that will eventually produce more conflict.

Christian Friends of Israel UK

PO Box 2687
Eastbourne
BN22 7LZ

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