



ICCJ Open Letter

“A PROCESS OF MUTUAL EMPOWERMENT”

AN OPEN LETTER TO ICCJ NATIONAL MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

From: The Executive Board of the International Council of Christians and Jews

Date: 20 September 2016

Re: Observations about the 14 September 2016 statement about Israeli-Palestinian relations by the General Secretaries of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, and of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, Jim Winkler

We live in a world that is increasingly polarized. Evidence for this claim is visible in numerous countries and on every inhabited continent. When people are no longer interested in communicating across their disagreements, when they become tired of the work and sensitivity that genuine communication requires, then polarization intensifies. Dialogue is the only activity that ultimately overcomes polarization and can transcend long histories of hostility and distrust.

The International Council of Christians and Jews believes that it is the role of religions to promote dialogue. This conviction has been at the core of our mission ever since the “Emergency Conference on Antisemitism” held at Seelisberg, Switzerland 1947—seventy years ago next August.

We have learned in our long efforts to build trust and rapport between Jews and Christians, and more recently with Muslims, that it is a slow and difficult process, demanding dedication, patience, and humility. Surely those virtues are essential in the context of one of the most polarized and polarizing situations in the world today: the continuing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians set amid the wider context of unrest, violence, and war throughout the Middle East.

We share these observations in response to messages from our national member organizations about the September 14th statement issued by the general secretaries of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, and of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, Jim Winkler (abbreviated herein as “WCC 2016”). [↔](#)

These brief remarks are based on the following ICCJ documents and we recommend them for further elaboration of the perspectives only reviewed in this letter:

- *A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians*, July 5, 2009 (see especially “The Story of the Transformation of a Relationship,” B, 5). [↔](#)
- “Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words,” July 26, 2010. [↔](#)

- “As Long as You Believe in a Living God, You Must Have Hope’: Reflections on the Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups in Promoting Reconciliation about and in the Troubled Middle East,” May 13, 2013. [↗](#)

The World Council of Churches and the International Council of Christians and Jews are both intercontinental organizations that fully coalesced after the Second World War. Both are concerned with promoting understanding and respect: the WCC primarily among the very diverse Christian traditions and the ICCJ between the long-estranged Christian and Jewish communities. Although unequal in terms of size and resources, the two organizations have periodically cooperated where our missions overlap and we look forward to continuing to do so in the future.

One area in which our respective missions especially converge is the dialogue among religions. The ICCJ resonates strongly with the understanding expressed by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in 2002: “Dialogue must be *a process of mutual empowerment*, not a negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather than being bound by the constraints of power relations, partners in dialogue should be empowered to join a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action for the good of all people” [“Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions,”§18; italics added]. The ICCJ is convinced that this vision of interreligious dialogue applies to all spheres of human interaction and is poignantly relevant for Palestinians and Israelis.

The ICCJ believes that it has an exceptional and invaluable perspective as an ecumenical Christian and “interdenominational” Jewish partnership that encourages interreligious amity in an enormous variety of contexts around the world. Neither the WCC nor the ICCJ speaks for all Christians; neither does the ICCJ speak for all Jews and Christians. However, we have learned much from the experience of post-Shoah rapprochement between Jews and Christians in the specific historical and cultural circumstances of our many national member organizations. When considering WCC 2016 we bring to bear this extensive experience of seeking to overcome millennia-old enmity between Christians and Jews. We express here our consensus view as an Executive Board composed of Christians and Jews, together with the Muslim co-chair of our International Abrahamic Forum.

We agree with WCC 2016 that no people should be denied their rights. As we wrote in 2013, “the status quo is intolerable [for] several reasons, including the unjust stateless condition of Palestinians; increasing antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian rhetoric; the growing risk of widespread violence; and mounting frustration that leads more and more people to embrace simplistic ‘solutions.’” We share with WCC 2016 the frustration and sense of urgency “to secure a just and lasting peace for Israel and Palestine.”

We differ with WCC 2016 on the role organizations such as ours should play in promoting this goal. We believe the principles sketched below, grounded on a vision of mutually enriching and empowering dialogue, should be followed. Most of them are adapted from ICCJ’s 2013 text:

- We believe that people discussing the Middle East need to recognise the complex history that led to the present situation; be open to hearing multiple narratives; and be aware of the effects of the disproportionality of power at different times and of shifting feelings of being in the minority or majority depending on context. The dynamics of the Middle East have no exact parallels with other historical conflicts and cases of social oppression elsewhere in the world, including Central Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Northern Ireland, South Africa, or the

experiences of the indigenous peoples of the Americas or Australia. In addition, all need to be wary of their unconscious biases.

- People ought to be able to criticize freely the government of Israel and its policies without being automatically accused of antisemitism or anti-Zionism. Likewise, they should be free to critique the failings of Muslim leaders—secular or religious— and the policies of Muslim nations without being charged with harboring irrational fears of Islam. Local Christian leaders can also be critiqued without invoking charges of anti-Christian motives. However, when criticism singles out the State of Israel according to standards not demanded of other nations, when Islam is branded as the religion of terrorists on the basis of statements and actions of radical extremists, when Palestinians are refused recognition as a distinct nationality—in short, whenever stereotypes and canards are invoked, the presence of ethnic or religious bigotry must be acknowledged and confronted.
- The present deplorable situation of Israelis and Palestinians is the result of a complex interplay for over a century among regional actors (both governmental and non-governmental) and a series of distant superpowers. Recognising that many parties manipulate unrest for their own ends and propagate self-serving misinformation, we are highly sceptical of simplistic proposals offered as ‘the solution’. Only a comprehensive process will be effective and lasting. It will not be attained by religious groups. Such a process must occur in the political and diplomatic realms where it is axiomatic that when legitimate rights clash, compromise is necessary.
- We believe that any particular proposals for action should be assessed as to whether they will increase feelings of fear or insecurity, or will polarize, or seem to represent only one of the many narratives of the conflicts.
- A crucial factor is often not what people say but how they are heard. For example, a speaker may call for an immediate ‘end to the Occupation’, meaning that Israel should relinquish governance over the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but others may hear this as referring to the pre-1948 situation and construe ‘end the Occupation’ as a call to eliminate Jewish sovereignty over any part of the Land. Ambiguity on this and similar points is unhelpful.
- We eschew the widespread practice of justifying political actions by invoking religious language. Some Jews and Christians appeal to biblical texts about the Jewish people being divinely promised possession of the Land of Israel, while others see themselves as prophetically ‘speaking truth to [Israeli] power’. Such appeals at least implicitly assert that ‘God is on our side’ in whatever is being argued and so unavoidably sanctify and absolutize conflicting political positions—positions that can be resolved only through compromise and the acceptance by all parties of what seems to them less than ideal.

Regrettably, it seems to us that WCC 2016 to varying degrees goes against all these principles. In particular, it implies that “the Occupation” is the root source of the sufferings of the peoples in the area and that its end, which seemingly lies entirely within the purview of the State of Israel, will in itself lead to justice and peace. Without regard for the multiple competing narratives of fear and pain afflicting the region, it expresses its misleadingly straightforward solution in a type of religious language that might appeal to certain strands within the Christian and Jewish communities, but will only alienate others.

In our opinion, the statement therefore encourages further polarization instead of helping to generate a culture of discourse in which Israelis and Palestinians—the ones who ultimately must live together—can build trust.

Acutely aware of our limitations, we believe that outsiders and international entities should do everything in their power to foster the growth of genuine, mutually empowering grassroots dialogue among those actually living in the Land. Political resolutions will not be achieved until such sustained interaction among ordinary people changes the hearts of leaders on all sides. Only then will the people of the region overcome what Kairos Palestine has called “the distorted perception of human beings in the heart of [our] brothers or sisters.” This is a conviction that the ICCJ Executive Board has come to only gradually thanks to conversations with and among Palestinian Christians and Israelis over time.

The ICCJ reiterates its praise and gratitude to those Palestinian Christians and Muslims and those Israeli Jews, Christians, and Muslims who continue to vigorously pursue the path of dialogue and friendship. Too few people in other parts of the world are aware of their inspiring work, which should be encouraged more and more.

People in other parts of the world who are concerned about the lives of all the people living in the Land often and quite reasonably feel frustrated and powerless at the persistent failure to finally establish peace, security, and prosperity in the region. Of course, none feel more pain at this reality than the residents themselves. We therefore recommend that our member organizations discover those many organizations, initiatives and programs that bring Palestinians and Israelis together to build empathy and solidarity, and support them in intensifying and expanding their work and in being heard and recognized. And, of course, the desperate straits of millions of refugees seeking to escape war and religious persecution across the Middle East also demand assistance from the international community.

We urge that everyone act with the spirit of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that was expressed years ago by the future Pope Francis, that we make room in our hearts for the other:

Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinions and their proposals. Dialogue entails a warm reception and not a preemptive condemnation. To dialogue, one must know how to lower the defenses, to open the doors of one’s home and to offer warmth.

SIGNED BY
THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS (ICCJ)
AND THE CO-CHAIRS OF THE ICCJ INTERNATIONAL ABRAHAMIC FORUM (IAF)
MARTIN-BUBER-HOUSE HEPPENHEIM, SEPTEMBER 20, 2016

cc: World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches of Christ, USA