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From Liberation to Coexistence: Redefining Palestinian Liberation Theology

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From Liberation to Coexistence

Redefining Palestinian Liberation Theology

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	21
Chapter 3	30
Chapter 4	37
Chapter 5	48
Conclusion	52
Appendix 1- Chart of Settlement Populations	56
Appendix 2- The Jerusalem Sabeel Document	57
Bibliography	68

Abstract

Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT), a movement founded by Naim Ateek in Jerusalem in 1989, strives for peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians. It developed as a religious response to a cultural and political problem in Israel-Palestine, largely as a means of addressing issues arising from the treatment of Palestinians by Israel.

Because of its name, PLT is often directly associated with Latin American liberation theology, which developed as an application of social principles sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), often in combination with Marxist ideology. This connection is unfounded; PLT's distinctive characteristics make it stand quite apart from its Latin American counterpart.

This thesis systematically examines these characteristics and then gives due attention to the criticisms that have been leveled against them by various individuals and groups. It will conclude with a discussion of how PLT, in light of these criticisms, might be reconfigured to enable it to reach its intended audiences and achieve its goals more effectively.

“[Liberation theology] includes a core element of commitment to identifying and ameliorating the sources of spiritual and physical oppression of the poor, but that core element has been applied in different ways over time.”¹

Introduction

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology evolved from the Catholic Church’s renewed emphasis on defending the poor. Out of social inequalities and hardships in Latin America there emerged a hope for the poor and oppressed. A few decades later, Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) arose out of a comparable situation.

Palestinians were living in oppressive conditions, and adherents of PLT believed the Palestinian people deserved to live in peace in their own state, coexisting with Israel.

In this paper, I will first explain PLT. Against this general backdrop, I will explain Latin American liberation theology’s origins and development. Although PLT is called a liberation theology, serious questions arise as to whether it should be categorized as such since it differs so strikingly from other versions of liberation theology. In the third chapter, I will explore whether these differences are significant. In the fourth chapter, I will consider critics of PLT and also present other organizations and schools of thought that deal with the Israeli-Palestinian problem in different ways. Finally, I will consider how PLT challenges the narrow understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a Jewish-Muslim antagonism. How does PLT affect the position of Christians in the Jewish state and alongside their Muslim neighbors?

¹ Paul E. Sigmund, “Development of Liberation Theology: Continuity or Change?“, in *The Politics of Latin American Liberation Theology*, ed. Richard Rubenstein & John Roth (Washington D.C: The Washington Institute Press, 1988), 22.

Chapter 1

Palestinian Liberation Theology as a Movement

Historical Backdrop for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

PLT grew out of the subjugation of Palestinians by Israel. In 1947 the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine proposed a partition plan, according to which Palestine was to be divided into a Jewish and an Arab state.² Palestinian Arabs were angered that the Jews, who previously owned only 6% of land and accounted for far less of the population than Arabs, were given land amounting to more than 50% of the land then known as Palestine.³ Worried about the anger brewing in the Arab land, the United Nations suspended the two-state plan within six months of the proposal.⁴ The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine reconvened to discuss how to proceed without enraging the Jews or the Arabs.

Many Jews, frustrated at the sluggish progress being made on the land debate, decided to take matters into their own hands. Using the withdrawal of British troops to their advantage, Zionists overtook town after town in Palestine.⁵ Palestinians living within the borders of the land desired by Israel either fled for fear of death or were forced to leave their homes by Zionist troops. These troops, disregarding plans proposed by the United Nations, continued to take land, which amounted to more than would have been given to them under the partition plan. By 1948 Jewish Zionists commandeered 77% of the land known as

² Mark Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 273.

³ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 31.

⁴ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 274.

⁵ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 278.

Palestine, displacing nearly one million Palestinians.⁶ These Palestinians were forced to move to refugee camps or other areas of the country not occupied by the Zionists. The UN passed a resolution in December 1948 allowing Palestinians to return to their homes, yet Israel repeatedly refused to allow this.⁷

In 1948 the United Nations proclaimed the state of Israel. Those Palestinians who chose to remain in Israel were given citizenship in the newly formed state but in many cases were treated poorly.⁸ The United Nations appointed a peacekeeper of sorts, Count Folke Bernadotte, who was meant to assist in a peaceful adjustment to the land demarcation proposed by the UN.⁹ He was soon assassinated and never replaced.¹⁰ As soon as the British mandate ended, other Arab countries entered Israel in order to aid the Palestinians in their struggle for land. Because they were far outnumbered and markedly undertrained, the Arab armies sought to end the war with an armistice in 1949.¹¹

Methodological Approach

In interpreting these events, of course, many conflicting views and countless accounts have been presented by Israelis, Palestinians, and “outsiders” over the past six decades. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an extremely complex and contentious topic than can be—and has been—approached from a wide array of stances. For purposes of this paper, I am focusing on the perspectives of Palestinians who have experienced the tumultuous events described above and their aftermath, especially Naim Ateek and Elias Chacour, both Palestinian Christians who have lived in the occupied territories for most of their lives and

⁶ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 273.

⁷ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 275.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 273.

¹⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 32.

¹¹ Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 279.

who have both played central roles in the Palestinian cause. I certainly recognize that this “emic” perspective of PLT is not without its critics, the substance of whose criticisms I will also discuss below, thus tempering the “emic” perspective with an external, “etic” one. To understand PLT adequately, however, the emic perspective must be our starting point.

The Experiences of the Founder

Naim Ateek was born in 1937 in a village known as Beisan south of the Sea of Galilee.¹² He moved to Nazareth once the Zionist troops came to occupy the village in 1948. In 1967 he was ordained to the priesthood of the Anglican Church. He holds degrees from several American universities, including Hardin-Simmons University and the San Francisco Theological Seminary.¹³

Stories recounted by Ateek in his book *Justice and Only Justice* help to shed light on the life of an Arab living in the newly formed state of Israel. When he was a child, Ateek and his family were forced out of their home with nowhere to take refuge.¹⁴ Ateek’s father wished to remain in his home and even promised fleeing neighbors he would look after their belongings. After a few days, however, soldiers stood on the doorstep of the Ateeks’ home and demanded that the family leave immediately. When Ateek’s father refused, he was given two options: leave the land or die.¹⁵ Ateek and his siblings gathered what they could carry and moved their belongings to the center of their town, hoping to return home to retrieve

¹² “About Fosna: Leadership,” Friends of Sabeel North America, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://fosna.org/steering-committee>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

more. When they reached the center of town, they were trapped within a fence that the soldiers had erected to prevent people from fleeing.¹⁶

The soldiers soon separated the Muslims from the Christians, sending the Muslims to Jordan and bussing the Christians to Nazareth, which had not yet come under Israeli control.¹⁷ In a flash, Ateek's entire world was ripped from him. His father had to start his business anew, his family had to find a new home and quickly settle in, and they all had to deal with the shock of being forced out of the town they called home. It quickly became apparent that the Ateek family, along with all other residents of Beisan, would not be allowed to return home and that Nazareth was to be their new permanent residence. Ateek described the deepest wounds of this shocking displacement as being psychological. He explained in his book how families were separated, both metaphorically and literally, by the newly created borders. People were worried about family members and had no way of contacting them; many Palestinians were bitter about their inability to protect Palestine from occupation.¹⁸

The Testimony of Elias Chacour

Ateek's contemporary, Elias Chacour, was born in 1939 in a village in upper Galilee. When Israeli forces threatened his hometown of Biram, he and his family moved to the city of Jish.¹⁹ He and his family all became Israeli citizens when the state of Israel was created in 1948.²⁰ In 1965 he was ordained and in that same year became the priest of Saint George's

¹⁶Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 11.

¹⁹ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984), 51.

²⁰ "Elias Chacour," Washington National Cathedral, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://www.nationalcathedral.org/staff/PE-6397I-8C000R.shtml>.

Melkite Catholic Church in Ibillin, where he remained until he became Archbishop of Haifa in 2006.²¹

Chacour, arguably the most widely known PLT advocate, recounts the struggles he has faced throughout his life in his book *We Belong to the Land*. He explains that his family's abrupt displacement from Biram as a result of the Balfour Declaration was among the most traumatic experiences of his life;²² he therefore places particular emphasis on the right of the people to be consulted during any decision-making process in Israel-Palestine, especially those involving displacement. He begins his book with an explanation of the relentless questioning and inspection to which Palestinians have been subjected any time they wish to travel. He mentions that officers have stopped and searched him every time he has traveled.²³ The most torturous part for him is being referred to as an "Arab" rather than a Palestinian. He remembers being told, after a long battle between the Supreme Court of Justice and military authorities, that he could return to his home if he wished, but "the bulldozers will bury [him] under the rubble of the houses."²⁴

When he assumed his pastoral duties in Ibillin, he faced opposition from townspeople because of his outsider status and spent much of his time trying to be accepted by them.²⁵ He reached out to all members of the community and even invited Muslims to pray in his church when the mosque of the town was struck by lightning.²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 8.

²³ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 2.

²⁴ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 80.

²⁵ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 10.

²⁶ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 55.

Through his study at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which began in 1967, Chacour began understanding the large-scale impact of the struggles the Palestinians face.²⁷ In *We Belong to the Land*, he states that 75% of Palestinians in Galilee were below twenty-eight years of age, 50% were under fourteen years of age, and nothing at all was being done to better their future.²⁸ His studies at the University and interactions with the people of Ibillin left him with an insatiable desire to “change the current situation and future of Palestinian young people in Galilee.”²⁹ One of his most vivid memories from childhood included attending the “woefully inadequate school” in the town of Jish.³⁰ Thankfully, he was able to move out of this town, attend adequate schools, and eventually become a priest with an impressive higher education. He wanted the children of Ibillin and all other Palestinian children to have the opportunities he did, despite the regulations imposed by the Israeli government. He started by personally stocking the Ibillin Public Library with his own books, which he considered to be treasures to be shared with these children.³¹ He then founded a kindergarten in his own home during the day. He undertook the building of a secondary school in Jish, but scaffolding at the building site collapsed as a result of tampering.³² After this, the construction was heavily monitored, and the Chrysostom Secondary School was eventually completed.

Chacour applied for a building permit to build a secondary school in the city of Ibillin in 1981 after seeing the successes of the school in Jish. His application was soon denied

²⁷ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 61.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 62.

³² Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 118.

because of the expense of the project and the use of the land for agriculture.³³ Neither of these reasons sounded valid or reasonable to Chacour, and he remained determined to found a secondary school in the area. Chacour and his allies lost all financial support from groups in Israel-Palestine when he decided to continue the construction despite the Israeli government's explicit denial of permission. He therefore turned to an old friend, the Queen of the Netherlands, whom he had met on a trip abroad and who praised him for his work, for funding to cover the cost of building materials. She recommended the project to the Inter-Church Coordination Committee in the Netherlands, which awarded a gift of \$400,000.³⁴ For four months at the start of construction of the school police came to the site routinely and arrested around thirty men, never touching Chacour because of the international backlash that would be caused, and released them the same day they were arrested.³⁵ Soon Chacour was ordered to appear in court because of the illicit building of the secondary school. In the five months the court gave Chacour to find a lawyer, the secondary school was completed. The Prophet Elias High School opened in Ibillin in September 1982.³⁶ The court eventually reached the decision that Chacour would never obtain a permit, but the school would not be destroyed. One day in October 1983 Chacour received an anonymous call offering him a permit for his school for \$1,000. Chacour agreed to this deal and finally received an official building permit for his secondary school.³⁷

³³ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 133.

³⁴ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 138.

³⁵ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 140.

³⁶ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 149.

³⁷ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 160.

Chacour encouraged Israel to act in a way that would ensure that Zionism, upon which, according to Chacour, the state of Israel was founded, did not develop into racism.³⁸ This worry arose out of a belief that Israel is a state “not for the Jews but of the Jews, and only of the Jews.”³⁹ He called attention to the racism that the Palestinians had faced from the Ottoman Turks and that the Jews had faced from Hitler’s regime as a reminder for Israelis not to act in similar ways; he argued that “there are only a few small steps between protecting and championing an oppressed group of people and proclaiming the rights of that group as more important than the rights of others.”⁴⁰ He decried violence by drawing an analogy to a man carrying garbage: if a man is carrying smelly garbage next to you and you eventually get angry enough that you decide to do likewise by carrying your own smelly garbage to spite him, you have acted irrationally.⁴¹ He explained that, in the same way, violence and hatred cannot be answered with more hatred and violence. He spoke with officials from the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden, and many other places as a diplomat for the Palestinian people. Through this, he developed many connections that helped him in his pursuits and gained international acclaim for his efforts for the Palestinian people.

“Unforgivable Injustices”

The writings of both Ateek and Chacour provided ample evidence that injustices pervaded the land of Israel as a result of the application of martial law and the unlawful seizing of Palestinian land. Those Arabs who were displaced were forbidden to return to their hometowns. Ateek listed two unforgivable injustices, which he believed led to the severe instability between Palestinians and Israelis today. The first was the application of

³⁸ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 68.

³⁹ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 87.

⁴⁰ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 69.

⁴¹ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 121.

martial law in 1948, which restricted Palestinian movement around the country and across borders and thereby limited contact among Palestinians.⁴² Travel permits were required to move around the land and they were extraordinarily hard to obtain.⁴³ Security zones were established to serve as buffers, space between the homes of Israelis and the homes of Arabs, to ensure the safety of Jews from the supposed threat posed by the the Palestinians. These security zones included checkpoints for travel, which further slowed the Palestinian movement around the land; this left the Palestinians divided. Israelis also kept the Emergency Defense Regulations of the British Mandate. Under these regulations, the state suspended the rights of individuals for its own benefit.⁴⁴ For example, a military commander could destroy a house upon suspicion of any illegal activity, private property could be seized, and the Israelis could expel people from the country.⁴⁵

The second unforgivable act was the forcible seizing of Palestinian land. In 1950 Israel issued a law by which the government could seize any Palestinian property without cause or reason. Israel now could take the land not only of Palestinians who had fled earlier to other countries but also of Palestinians who stayed in the Jewish state and still technically owned their land, such as Ateek's family.⁴⁶ This unjustified seizing of land paved the way for the establishment of Jewish settlements. Between 1948 and 1953, 370 settlements were built.⁴⁷ Some Palestinians were offered small sums of money for their land, but these sums were so miniscule that they were viewed as disparaging, and consequently many Arabs refused the money. The restriction of the freedom of Palestinians to travel around the

⁴² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 34.

⁴³ Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 44.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

country, as well as the threat to their property and selves, proved unbearable for Arabs in the state of Israel.

Settlements

Since the formation of the Jewish state in 1948, many settlements have been created along the West Bank and Gaza.⁴⁸ After the Six-Day War in 1967 Israel altered the borders of Jerusalem to create what is referred to as “Greater Jerusalem.”⁴⁹ After the creation of this new capital, many settlements, apartment-style living quarters for Jews returning to Israel, were created within the borders of the city to ensure a Jewish majority.⁵⁰ Palestinians were rarely able to build homes within the borders of Jerusalem and were allowed to live only in certain areas of the city, a situation which still obtains today.⁵¹ Palestinians were forbidden from entering most of the West Bank since they were not allowed to enter Israeli settlements, to drive on roads connecting settlements, or to travel through “security zones” near settlements.⁵² As seen in the table provided,⁵³ the population of the settlements has grown sizably year after year. Thousands of Jews per year were moved into settlement areas in order to displace Palestinians; this phenomenon is especially prevalent in the West Bank.

New Borders

After the Six-Day War in 1967, the Gaza strip, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula all became occupied territories of Israel.⁵⁴ This capture of land led to what Sabeel characterizes as “oppressive, brutal, and dehumanizing” treatment of

⁴⁸ “Maps of Israel and Palestine,” accessed November 15, 2012. <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/history/maps.html>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Appendix 1

⁵⁴ Leonard Marsh. “Whose Holy Land?,” *Studies in World Christianity* 15 (2009): 276.

Palestinians by Israel.⁵⁵ This second large-scale seizing of land also led to Israel's control of Palestine's water supply.⁵⁶ Using this newfound control, Israel frequently turned off the water of the Palestinians, leaving them in the desert climate without sufficient water for bathing or drinking, a situation which is still prevalent today. The water Israel did offer to the Palestinians was offered at exorbitant prices, forcing Palestinians to deprive themselves of other needs in order to have water to survive. Israel continued building settlements in many areas.⁵⁷ In 1993 Israel annexed and closed off East Jerusalem to the rest of Palestine in an attempt to limit Palestinians' access to Jerusalem proper.⁵⁸

First Intifada

In December 1987 a Jewish salesman was stabbed to death in Gaza.⁵⁹ Gaza was long thought to be a dangerous place and similar incidents had occurred before, so the residents thought little more of this killing than of any other. A few days later, however, a Jewish man suddenly jerked the wheel of his car and crashed into two other cars, killing four Palestinians and injuring seven.⁶⁰ Most Palestinians thought this odd and questioned whether this was truly just an accident. Protests erupted around Gaza, especially on the day of the funerals of the victims of the car accident. When Palestinians threw rocks at soldiers during these protests, the soldiers opened fire into the crowd, killing a seventeen-year-old boy.⁶¹ This was the fatal blow to the Palestinians' patience, and they began an outright rebellion, known as the *Intifada*, meaning uprising. Rioting in the West Bank and Gaza could not be contained.

⁵⁵ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document*, 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*. 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

When Ariel Sharon, the Prime Minister of Israel, said he had plans to move into a house in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem, Palestinians responded with protests in East Jerusalem.⁶² Sharon was a well-known antagonist of Palestine and its people, and his moving into the Muslim Quarter of the city was seen as an act of pure provocation. Stone-throwing became a regular occurrence in Gaza and often ended with casualties. On a January day in 1988 Muslims leaving Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem after prayer were beaten and dispersed with tear gas. Several days later, the same happened to Christians leaving the Holy Sepulcher.⁶³ Shortly after, leaders of Christian communities in Jerusalem issued a statement against the injustices occurring in Israel and the occupied territories, asking Christians to help those in need.⁶⁴ The *Intifada* allowed Palestinians to inform the world of their plight and to ask for assistance. Palestinians communicated their desire to end the occupation, to have the PLO represent them, and to claim their autonomy.⁶⁵

International Mediation

After the Gulf War ended in 1991, Russia and the United States encouraged the start of a peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.⁶⁶ Gradually areas of land were returned to limited Palestinian control. However, by March 2000 more than 50% of the West Bank was still under full Israeli control.⁶⁷ The areas that were returned to Palestinian control were not connected to each other, and Israel still controlled the roads that joined the areas, as well as anything below the ground and in the sky.⁶⁸ Sabeel noted that today Israel controls 40%

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*. 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*. 47.

⁶⁶ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document*, 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

of the land for the benefit of a little over six thousand Israelis whereas Palestinians control 60% of the land where over one million Palestinians reside.⁶⁹

The Formation of PLT

Against the backdrop of these political developments, several influential religious leaders saw the need for a theology like that which developed in Latin America to assert the rights of those who had no advocates. It is not a surprise that among these leaders was Naim Ateek. He founded the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in 1989. PLT directed attention toward two essential elements. First, any liberation theology applied to Palestine had to address the issue of justice, a concern so central to the Palestinian struggle since the formation of the state of Israel.⁷⁰ Second, it was necessary for PLT to address misuse of the Bible by many Jews and Christians to support injustice.⁷¹ PLT had to oppose such misappropriate readings of the biblical text and replace them with an interpretation that promoted fairness and equality for all people.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, 75.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jews and Christians alike used certain readings of the Bible to justify their opinions about the outcome of the Six Day War and the state of Israel in general. Many Israelis saw the winning of the Six-Day War as the intervention of G-d on the part of the Israelis, meaning it was viewed as divinely desired. In Palestine, as in Latin America, governments used religion to support injustices. Zionist readings of the Bible were advanced to support the subjugation of the Arabs. Disagreement existed over whether the 'Israel' referred to in the Bible referred to the Israel of the era of the twelve tribes or to the state of modern Israel. Many Christians and Muslims believed that Israelis were unjustified in using scriptural texts to refer to the current state of Israel to advance their own political and military agenda.

Sabeel stresses several biblical passages that form the foundation of PLT. Instead of focusing on Bible passages as justification for wrongs done to groups or victories for a particular state, PLT uses Bible passages to show the love of G-d for all people—and how this implies fair treatment for all. Sabeel teaches that G-d loves all people equally, as shown in John 3:16 and Acts 17:24-28. It also teaches justice, peace, and security for all people in all parts of the world and the acceptability of pursuing justice through any non-violent means, for example, in the books of Jeremiah (chapter 9), Isaiah (chapter 32), and Romans (chapter 12).

Sabeel warned against, and strongly opposed, Israel's giving Gaza to the Palestinians while themselves maintaining control of the West Bank. The "Jerusalem Sabeel Document," issued in 2006, raised concerns that Israel would not truly give up the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) to Palestinians.⁷³ Sabeel suspected that Israel would rather concede only Gaza in an effort to quell the Palestinians' demand for a state. Palestinian liberation theologians and Palestinians in general refused to recognize this as a viable solution to the problem of land for Palestine. Palestinians desired the land of the West Bank, including that of East Jerusalem for their capital. Conceding to Palestinians anything less, according to the "Jerusalem Sabeel Document," would only create more problems and further gruesome conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.⁷⁴

The "Sabeel Document" proposed a true two-state solution, with separate sovereigns for each state. Israel should give back all of the land in the occupied territories, including that of East Jerusalem.⁷⁵ The only way to appease Palestinians with regard to Jewish settlements would be to make them the dwellings of Palestinians returning home. Israel should also compensate the owners from whom the land for settlements was originally taken.⁷⁶ Jews could stay in the new Palestine and become Palestinian citizens living under Palestinian sovereignty. Both countries must share Jerusalem, and its borders must remain open to all who wish to travel there.⁷⁷ Sabeel proposed that Israel and Palestine eventually enter into a federation or confederation with Jerusalem as the federal capital.⁷⁸ Sabeel

⁷³ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document*, 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document*, 4.

envisioned one state consisting of two autonomous nations living together peacefully and fairly, ensuring the safety of all people.

Tenets of PLT

In the “Document,” Sabeel advocates seven main tenets of PLT:

- First, Israel must admit the injustices it has committed against the Palestinian people and accept responsibility for its actions and their consequences.⁷⁹ This would include paying reparations to those who are currently living in, and were displaced from, the West Bank or Gaza Strip.
- Second, Palestinians must have their own leader and governing body for the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem.⁸⁰ All land taken by Israel after the Six Day War must be returned to Palestinian control.
- Third, sovereignty over Jerusalem must belong to both Israel and Palestine.⁸¹ East Jerusalem would serve as the capital of Palestine, and West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Each part of the city should be open to all races and religions, including holy sites within the city.
- Fourth, all Palestinian refugees must be allowed to return to their homes and must be compensated.⁸² Israel must act in accordance with international law on the issue of refugees.
- Fifth, all Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and West Bank built since 1967 must be considered part of Palestine.⁸³ This also follows from international law on the subject of refugees and displacement.
- Sixth, an agreement must be reached and signed by both Israel and Palestine outlining human rights issues, such as displacement of people and water rights, as well as rules of sovereignty to be followed in the future.⁸⁴
- Seventh, that both states must agree to respect and protect the rights of their citizens regardless of their religion.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, *The Jerusalem Sabeel Document*, 2.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

In the six decades since the foundation of the modern state of Israel, many injustices have occurred in Israeli-Palestinian interactions. Having personally encountered the oppression and marginalization of the Palestinian people by Israel, Naim Ateek and Elias Chacour were instrumental in fostering a liberation theology for the Palestinian people that focused on hope for peace and coexistence. To the present day, Sabeel, the ecumenical center advocating the tenets of PLT, continues to strive to rectify wrongdoings that prevent constrictive Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Chapter 2

Understanding Relevant Concepts of Latin American Liberation Theology

The founders of PLT were profoundly influenced by liberation theology and its application in Latin America. To understand the similarities and profound differences, it is necessary to look a bit deeper at Latin American liberation theology's roots, function, and implementation.

Setting the Scene

Problems abounded in Latin America in the middle of the twentieth century. A promised economic boost never materialized, and some economists argued that development in these countries was needed to alleviate the burden of the poor and lead the countries toward democracy. In the 1950s and 1960s the Catholic Church wanted to avoid losing support and so decided to send priests to integrate with the poor in an attempt to reach out to poor communities, convert them, and, in doing so, revive the Catholic faith. Living with the poor opened the eyes of many priests as to just how desperate the situation was for many in Latin America.⁸⁶ After experiencing the hardships of the living conditions in these areas, some Catholic thinkers became interested in the writings of scholars who “questioned the concept of underdevelopment elaborated in the north, rejected a functionalist approach to sociology, and began to use Marxist categories to explain reasons behind Latin American poverty and stagnation.”⁸⁷ This line of thinking led to the development of liberation

⁸⁶ Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 7.

⁸⁷ J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), 25.

theology, which challenged the status-quo.⁸⁸ The founder of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, chose the word “liberation” because it stood in stark contrast with the dependence on the government that the poor of Latin America had felt for so long and because the term had a long history within the Church and Church literature.⁸⁹

Gustavo Gutierrez

Gustavo Gutierrez, a priest from Peru, is regarded as the founder of liberation theology in Latin America. He aimed to create a theology that forced the Church to “cease considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation and orient itself towards a new and radical service of people.”⁹⁰

Two concepts emerged as central to liberation theology: the “view from below” and “preferential option for the poor.” The view from below stresses six characteristics that differentiate it from earlier theologies: starting with the poor, the concept of the nonperson, the use of social science tools, the process of conflict analysis, the engagement of praxis, and the application of the “second act” theology.⁹¹ Starting with the poor emphasizes a change in starting point for theological inquiry; whereas other theologies look at nature or G-d as the starting point, liberation theology looks toward the poor among whom the problems are most strongly felt.⁹² The concept of the nonperson emphasizes that liberation theology starts with a focus on the poor, who are seen as nonpersons or ignored by the rest of society regularly.⁹³ The use of social science tools emphasizes a shift from the use of idealized philosophy to the use of social science grounded in reality since the latter gives one tools to bring about

⁸⁸ Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World*, 26.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1971), 256.

⁹¹ Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a New Key* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 60.

⁹² Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 61.

⁹³ Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 63.

necessary change rather than just an analysis of how things appear to be.⁹⁴ When these tools are used, one comes to an analysis of the world that is riddled with conflict that must be changed.⁹⁵ Praxis means understanding all of the above concepts and applying them to the world to effect necessary change to help the dispossessed.⁹⁶ A “second act” theology employs a commitment to stand alongside the poor and work for change, and then reflects on the results of this mindset.⁹⁷

The preferential option for the poor requires the cutting of close ties with the wealthy, with whom the Church had aligned herself for so much of history, and being completely transformed to favor and support the poor. The Church must become a means by which others can learn about the plight of the poor. In short, liberation theology called for the Church to provide a preferential option for the poor in two ways: first, the Church must become a sign of liberation and preach of liberation often; and second, the Church must be an instrument of liberation and act on it frequently.⁹⁸

Catholic Ties

Latin American liberation theology had close ties with, and was strongly controlled by, the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) formally opened the Catholic Church to other religious thought and endorsed democratic government and religious pluralism. As Paul Sigmund points out, this amounted only to a formal acceptance of these ideas; very little of what came out of Vatican II could be applied to the lives of the poor in Latin America because of the economic distress most of Latin America was still

⁹⁴ Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 65.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 68.

⁹⁶ Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 71.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 73.

⁹⁸ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, 45.

feeling at that time.⁹⁹ CELAM, the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, or Latin American Bishops' Council, held their first of two meetings in Medellin in 1968 to decide how to apply the outcomes of Vatican II to their region. One hundred thirty bishops representing every country in Latin America met at Medellin.¹⁰⁰ The documents that arose out of this council were heavily influenced by liberation theology and the language of the movement.¹⁰¹ Instead of discussing how to apply Vatican II specifically, the bishops generated documents concerning social change and the status of the poor in Latin America.¹⁰² At this council, Gustavo Gutierrez argued that the bishops should be speaking about "liberation" rather than "development" as the goal of these countries' poor. He advocated profound social change in order to uproot social classes as they stood and to leave the poor in a more advantageous state.¹⁰³ At a meeting sponsored by the World Churches Council, Gustavo Gutierrez delivered a lecture entitled "Notes on Theology of Liberation" that furthered the ideas emerging out of CELAM. This lecture attracted followers to his newly developed theology.¹⁰⁴

In 1979 the Puebla Conference was held in Mexico. This was an opportunity for the more conservative among the Latin American bishops to voice their opinions and gain control once again, reversing the growing acceptance of liberation theology.¹⁰⁵ Conservative bishops were placed in strategic positions to control the proceedings at the conference.

⁹⁹ Paul E. Sigmund, "Development of Liberation Theology: Continuity or Change?," in *The Politics of Latin American Liberation Theology*, eds. Richard Rubenstein & John Roth (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute Press, 1988), 23.

¹⁰⁰ Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 18.

¹⁰¹ Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World*, 27.

¹⁰² Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, 18.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, 23.

However, the idea of the preferential option for the poor prevailed, and liberal bishops remained in the majority.

Since the conference in Puebla, the Catholic Church has taken actions to quell the influence of liberation theology as much as possible. Pope John Paul II issued warnings throughout the 1980s aimed at liberation theology and its adherents.¹⁰⁶ He adamantly opposed liberation theology from the moment he became Pope. The Church has also appointed extremely conservative bishops to those areas of Latin America where liberation theology has had a particularly strong influence.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the Church has simultaneously criticized liberation theologians on an individual basis.¹⁰⁸

Marxism

Gutierrez stressed Marxism in his emphasis on equality in the economic structure of Latin America and in his explanation of current economic disparities.¹⁰⁹ On the basis of Marxist analyses, scholars of liberation theology studied the economic and political characteristics of capitalism in order to understand it fully and to make a thorough attack on

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, 223.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, 224.

¹⁰⁹ To be sure, liberation theology can be characterized as a Marxist idea by virtue of its stance on dialectical materialism. Developed by both Hegel and Marx, dialectical materialism is an analysis of reality, specifically how the lower, poorer class develops. As one could guess, it is the combination of two of Marx's fundamental principles: dialectics and materialism. Dialectics is a way of thinking which attempts to allow one to understand both a thing's "form and content", which can be very different. It focuses on understanding a thing through its "movement, change, and interconnection."(Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 38) This idea pertains to liberation theology because dialectics sees cause and effect as two sides of a "whole network of relations such as we have in an ecosystem, and one thing cannot be changed without changing the whole system."(Marx, *The German Ideology*) Materialism emphasizes thoughts as reflections of objects which exist outside of and independently from the mind itself.

So, liberation theologians use dialectical materialism to explain how capitalism and the state of affairs of Latin America in past years led to the existence of the poor and the extreme class stratification. They viewed these things as cause and effect, but interdependent, both needing to be changed to create any real improvement for the lower classes. They thought that all of history in Latin America and the political system at that time contributed to the state of the poor and it needed to be improved before the position of the poor ever could be.

it. Many criticized liberation theology for these Marxist leanings.¹¹⁰ Gutierrez argued that the economic roots of the problems of Latin America were starting to be revealed in the 1970s and “to attack these deep causes is the indispensable prerequisite for radical change.”¹¹¹ He stressed that the use of Marxism was absolutely essential “for understanding the mechanisms of oppression imposed by the prevailing social order.”¹¹² Without the application of Marxism to understand the cause of the economic disparity, one would never be able to understand the proper and optimal solution.

As an aspect of Marxist theory, praxis, which Gutierrez defines as “interpret[ing] historical events with the intention of unveiling and proclaiming their profound meaning,” is a guiding principle for Latin American liberation theology.¹¹³ It was viewed as an automatic response to the injustice and inequality faced by the poor of Latin America.¹¹⁴ All action should be guided by reflection upon and understanding of the problems.

Opposition to Governmental Structures and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

Liberation theology in Latin America strongly opposed the prevailing governmental and hierarchical structures and sought their elimination. Gutierrez argued that “the dispossessed exist because of those who direct and govern [Latin American] society.”¹¹⁵ Gutierrez responded angrily to those in power who commented that the circumstances in which the poor found themselves, though unfortunate, were unavoidable. He rallied the poor

¹¹⁰ Cadorette, “Liberation Theology: Context and Method,” 7.

¹¹¹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 48.

¹¹² Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 192.

¹¹³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 33.

¹¹⁴ Cadorette, “Liberation Theology: Context and Method,” 7.

¹¹⁵ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 274.

and argued that these circumstances were clearly caused by those in power seeking to take advantage of those in a less fortunate position.¹¹⁶

Gutierrez commented that “to love one’s enemies presupposes recognizing that one has class enemies and that it is necessary to combat them.”¹¹⁷ The enemy in the case of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s was the government and upper classes who used their advantage over the poor to gain money and power. Because of this seeming war on the poor, Gutierrez urged the lower classes to “forge bonds of solidarity among themselves to organize in the struggle against the conditions they are in and against those who benefit from these conditions.”¹¹⁸ He argued that creating a new society benefitting the poor required “the creation of new human persons, as well, who must be progressively liberated from whatever enslaves them.”¹¹⁹ So governments must be completely renewed, and a different sort of human being must be put in charge in order to reach a fair and equal economic situation for all.

In his book *Church: Charism and Power*, Boff criticized the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and its seeming indifference toward the poor and oppressed.¹²⁰ He argued against the hierarchical model of the Church and emphasized that the Church’s response to the poor should not arise from those in power over communities but from within the communities themselves.¹²¹ So, the general opposition to hierarchical structures in liberation theology arose out of distaste for governmental and ecclesiastical dynamics in Latin America.

¹¹⁶ Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 117.

¹¹⁷ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 276.

¹¹⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 289.

¹¹⁹ Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 192.

¹²⁰ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and social Movement Theory*, 225.

¹²¹ Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?*, 83.

Not “Grassroots” in Origin

Latin American liberation theology was founded from bishops’ and priests’ experiences of living with the poor classes, from which these clergymen do not originate. As previously mentioned, the priests primarily connected with liberation theology were relocated to live in poor areas to revive the Catholic faith. These priests were not raised in and did not originate from these poor communities. In this way, liberation theology in Latin American was not a grassroots movement in the purest sense; it certainly originated from the poor areas, but it did not arise from the people of these communities themselves. It instead originated from people living in these conditions because of placement by the Catholic Church. However, once there, they could not ignore the hardships experienced by the people of these areas and worked to right the wrongdoings of the government and the Church.

Universal Theology

Gutierrez developed a theology that was universal in scope and could be applied to any place in the world where the rich oppressed the poor. Gutierrez argued that “if faith is a commitment to [G-d] and human beings, it is not possible to live in today’s world without a commitment to the process of liberation.”¹²² He asserted that there are many countries in the world that face the same problems faced in his home country of Peru and other Latin American countries. Although Latin American liberation theology was developed as a way to apply Vatican II to Latin America, it was never intended to be a theology applied only to Latin America. Gutierrez wrote about his intention that praxis should be a means “through which nations, social classes, and individuals struggle to free themselves from domination

¹²² Gutierrez, *Essential Writings*, 25.

and oppression by other nations, classes, and individuals.”¹²³ He thought not only that liberation theology could be applied to any *country* in the world to combat the same issues as in Latin America, but also that liberation theology could be applied to any *situation* in which there was an oppressor and oppressed. This included individual struggles, class struggles, and international struggles. In the broadest sense, liberation theology as it was developed in Latin America was meant to be a universal theology.

Conclusion

The above is a short introduction to Latin American liberation theology highlighting the relevant points for this thesis: (1) Latin American liberation theology had strong ties with the Catholic Church, which played an integral role in its development and application. (2) The economic goals of liberation theology led it toward a Marxist ideology and analysis of the issues. (3) Liberation theology in Latin America strongly opposed hierarchical structures and therefore strove to eliminate these structures. (4) While it can be understood as a grassroots movement, liberation theology came from the elite clergymen who were not originally a part of the oppressed classes in Latin America. (5) Lastly, liberation theology as it was developed in Latin America was meant to have a universal application.

¹²³ Gutierrez, *Essential Writings*, 33.

Chapter 3

How Do They Compare?

As the foregoing chapters indicate, the theologies of Gutierrez and Ateek both originated from experiences of living with the marginalized, but the marginalization in the two cases differed significantly. In this chapter, I will investigate the major differences between liberation theology and PLT by virtue of the different situations and populations they intended to address.

Narrow vs. Broad Religious Affiliation

The deep involvement of the Catholic Church explains many of liberation theology's differences from PLT. From the start, nearly everything about liberation theology was linked to the Catholic Church. Liberation theologians themselves sought to have their thought validated by Catholic ecclesiastical authority.

However, the Church diametrically opposed central ideas of liberation theology from the beginning. Councils were called to analyze those ideas, and scholars who supported liberation theology at the time were called to Rome to be investigated. The attempts by Church officials to neutralize the "dangerous" ideas of liberation theology, however, backfired. The media focused its attention on the showdown between the institutionalized Church and the liberation theologians. Ironically, it was the opposition from some quarters of Church officialdom that placed liberation theology in the limelight and attracted the interest of the ordinary person in Latin America. Once their interest was piqued, poorer people in Latin America were drawn to the ideas of liberation theology.

On the other hand, because PLT is not associated with any one church, the involvement of hierarchical Church has not played such a crucial role in the development of PLT. The Center for PLT in Jerusalem is purposely called Sabeel *Ecumenical* Liberation Theology Center.¹²⁴ Based on its name, one can infer that the Sabeel Center and PLT are meant to be inclusive and not associated with any one religion or denomination. Though it is connected to Christianity in that it uses distinctively Christian religious symbolism and its founder was a clergyman, PLT does not wish to be associated with any Christian denomination in particular. Furthermore, it seeks to be as inclusive as possible even in its relations with non-Christian groups. Since its focus is on a problem deeply rooted in religion, PLT aims to be applicable to the lives of people of all faiths living in the Israeli-Palestinian context.

Because of the lack of association with one religion, no one religious group comments on or condemns PLT quite so harshly as the Catholic Church has condemned Latin American liberation theology. The Catholic Church, in particular, can have a crippling effect on a religious group if the Church decides to oppose that group. Because of its lack of connection with the Catholic Church, PLT has been much less controllable than its Latin American counterpart.

Economic vs. Political/Cultural Aims

Arising as it did from living conditions of the poor, Latin American liberation theology focuses primarily on economic concerns and outcomes. It attributes the plight of the poor to a monopolization of both money and power by the upper classes in Latin American

¹²⁴ Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, accessed November 20, 2012, www.sabeel.org.

societies. Thus, liberation theologians in Latin America see the “leveling” of the classes as the only solution to the social ills they address.

PLT, on the other hand, focuses on political and cultural aims. Its adherents view the root of the problem in Israel-Palestine to be the policies set up by the political system in place in Israel and the occupied territories. In contrast to Latin American liberation theology, PLT sees its ultimate goal as the termination of the occupation of Palestine and the peaceful coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians. The goal of PLT is for Israel and Palestine each to have its own state, each with autonomy of government, living in peace together with Jerusalem as the shared capital. PLT cares about economic issues only inasmuch as they relate to problems that hinder this two-state solution, meaning only in respect to the oppression of Palestine. In short, PLT has a primarily political aim that is only marginally influenced by economic concerns.

General Government Structures vs. Specific Injustices of Occupation

In accordance with its focus on economic aims, liberation theology targets oppressive government structures. Liberation theologians thoroughly and publicly analyze these structures in order to motivate the people to overthrow them and to remove all involved in them from power. When the Church started to condemn liberation theology in the 1980s, Gutierrez and others like him spoke out more openly and harshly, condemning hierarchy, whether within the Church or secular government, and seeking to replace it with more egalitarian structures that would allow the poor to have a say in their own governance.¹²⁵ This, they hoped, would lead also to a more equal distribution of money and an equalizing of

¹²⁵ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, 19.

class structure. Latin American liberation theology emphasizes Marxism through its use of anti-hierarchical action, coupled with a leveling of socioeconomic classes.

Conversely, PLT is not nearly so anti-hierarchical as Latin American liberation theology. The last thing PLT wants to do is further weaken churches that have already been weakened by Israel. PLT's focus is instead on targeting oppressive practices, namely the occupation of Palestine by Israel. PLT recognizes the practice of occupation of Palestinian territories as hindering both a safe life for Palestinians on an individual scale and the implementation of a two-state solution on a national scale. Subsequently, PLT does not employ Marxism at all. Sabeel wishes to stop the occupation of Palestine in order to reach its ultimate political goal of a two-state solution but does not desire eradication of the Israeli government in favor of a whole new system of governance.

Elimination of the “Other” vs. Coexistence with the “Other”

Because of its opposition to oppressive structures, Latin American liberation theology seeks to eliminate what they view as the “other,” namely oppressive governmental structures. Since they view these structures themselves as the enemy, they do not see any good that can come from continuing them in any form. Latin American theologians instead call for their eradication.

PLT, on the other hand, seeks coexistence with their “other”—Israel and its people. PLT distinguishes between Israel and its policies, strongly condemning the policies of occupation while recognizing good and redeeming aspects of Israel and its government overall. Unlike how Latin American liberation theology views their “other,” PLT views Israel as the “other,” though not as the enemy. PLT views some of Israel's practices as the

enemy and wish for those to be changed in favor of policies more auspicious to Palestinians, but see no use in demolishing the entire governmental system of Israel.

Elite vs. Grassroots Foundations

Liberation theology in Latin America developed among the educated elite of the Catholic Church, who had become immersed in the life of the poor, with which they had been largely unfamiliar. The ideas of liberation theology were advanced first at several conferences of bishops after the Second Vatican Council.¹²⁶ The ideas originated by the bishops were then passed down to the people, who could use this theology to explain their situation and develop a solution to alleviate their suffering. Even though Gutierrez called for the liberation of the people to come from within the people themselves, as it developed, the liberation of the people started with the bishops, who acted as the revolutionary leaders of the people.¹²⁷ Though at its origin liberation theology adamantly opposed the abuse of hierarchy as was demonstrated in Church, it tended to be the bishops who developed the ideas and conveyed them to the people; the people were then expected to follow the direction of the bishops in charge of the liberation theology movement. To cite a specific example of this dynamic: After the overthrowing of the Nicaraguan government in 1979, bishops from the area usurped the highest positions within the newly formed Sandinista regime.¹²⁸ Liberation theologians justified the establishment of this hierarchy by claiming that the bishops were the optimum choice for leaders in order to keep the focus of the regime from straying from liberation theology and its goals. In application (even if not always in theory), Latin

¹²⁶ McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment*, 16.

¹²⁷ Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads: Democracy or Revolution?*, 83.

¹²⁸ Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and social Movement Theory*, 228.

American liberation theology has tended to center on an elite few who developed ideas and passed them down to the people.

The common people played a different role in the emergence of PLT than they had in the rise of Latin American liberation theology. While liberation theology arose as an elevated academic idea, PLT, at every stage of its development, cultivated the involvement of people at the grassroots level. PLT grew out of the personal experiences of two Palestinian Christians under the oppression of Israel. These men were directly affected by the occupation at a young age, not just looking for a solution to a conflict into which they placed themselves. Ateek and Chacour had no choice but to face the Israeli occupation throughout their lives and eventually developed a peaceful means of addressing the conflict.

Universal Scope vs. Focus on Palestine

Although liberation theology was initially intended as a way to apply the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council in Latin America, it developed a perspective of universal applicability that reached far beyond Latin America alone. Gutierrez and bishops of Latin America realized that the situation of the poor in Latin America was not limited to their countries or areas; it could well apply to all peoples living under oppression anywhere in the world. The aims and beliefs of liberation theology are general enough to encourage a universal goal of ridding the poor of oppression everywhere. Ironically, this expansion of influence was enhanced by liberation theology's connection with the Catholic Church, which allowed it to receive attention, both positive and negative, throughout the world, especially in places like South America, South Africa, India, and Haiti.

By way of contrast, PLT did not receive such widespread notoriety at its start. Ateek founded PLT when he opened the Sabeel Center with the support of a few bishops like Elias

Chacour. However, overall, PLT has not become a general cause célèbre among clergy and laypeople. A small following has since developed in Jerusalem, but the ideas of PLT have not spread much beyond Israel, at least not nearly to the same extent as liberation theology spread in Latin America. Because PLT is so focused a theology and particular to the Israeli-Palestinian context, it was never meant to spread universally. Ateek did not seek to develop an idea that could be applied to any country in any part of the world; he sought to develop a solution to the problem faced specifically in Israel-Palestine.

Nevertheless, PLT has attracted supporters beyond Israel/Palestine. Sabeel has inspired a North American ally group known as Friends of Sabeel.¹²⁹ This group operates in North America by hosting conferences and workshops in order to sensitize Americans to the problems Palestinians face and what can be done to alleviate those problems.¹³⁰ Sabeel centers also exist in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and Australia.¹³¹ Although these centers are small and do not have a large following within their host countries, their very existence proves that Sabeel and PLT have exerted influence beyond the Middle East.

¹²⁹ “Friends of Sabeel North America,” accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.fosna.org>.

¹³⁰ “Mission and Purpose: Friends of Sabeel North America Mission Statement,” last modified 2012, <http://www.fosna.org/content/mission-purpose>.

¹³¹ “Sabeel International,” last modified 2012, <http://www.fosna.org/content/sabeel-international>.

Chapter 4

The Critics: Focusing on Shortcomings and Alternative Options

Many groups have criticized PLT for various reasons, most of which are rooted in the critics' strong perception that PLT is a fiercely anti-Semitic movement aiming to destroy Israel. Critics target six main points in their attacks on PLT: the inclusion of supersessionist theology, the use of the charge of deicide, the application of apartheid rhetoric, the elimination of the Jewish aspect of Israel, the ignoring of Muslim oppression of Christians, and the implementation of anti-Semitic activism.

Inclusion of Supersessionist Theology

Many critics find fault with PLT's acceptance of supersessionism, the idea that the New Testament replaced the Old and that G-d's covenant with Christians replaced G-d's promise to the Jews. This view, critics charge, is self-aggrandizing to Christians while simultaneously disparaging to Jews.¹³² The Anti-Defamation League quotes Stephen Sizer, a known anti-Semite and speaker at a Sabeel conference, as saying that G-d's "special connection with the Jews becomes irrelevant following the appearance of Jesus, and with it their entitlement to the land [of Israel]."¹³³ Sizer thinks that the exile of the Jews from the Holy Land "becomes part of the necessary order of things" stemming from their rejection of Jesus as the Son of G-d.¹³⁴ The accepted Christian belief is not that the New Testament replaced the Jews' Old Covenant with G-d but rather that the Christians entered into a new

¹³² "Sabeel and Naim Ateek Fact Sheet," NGO Monitor, last modified October 2, 2011, http://www.ngo-monitor.org/article/sabeel_and_naim_ateek_factsheet.

¹³³ "Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center: An ALD Backgrounder," Anti-Defamation League, last modified April 18, 2008, http://www.adl.org/main_Interfaith/sabeel_backgrounder.htm.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

and altogether different covenant with G-d, leaving the covenant previously established with the Jews untouched. Critics of PLT see the supersessionist view as a form of modern-day anti-Semitism that politicizes a historically religious issue; they believe PLT asserts that Jews now have no claim to land or a covenant with G-d because the Christians usurped the position of G-d's favored and chosen people.

Use of the Charge of Deicide

Deicide, according to critics, unfairly demonizes Israel and harkens back to a form of anti-Semitism largely rejected until its adoption by PLT. Deicide, meaning literally the killing of G-d, describes the blame placed on the Jews for the murder of Jesus. This form of anti-Semitism has its roots in Christian antiquity and was extraordinarily popular in pre-World War II Europe, especially in Nazi Germany.¹³⁵ Critics cite Ateek specifically as using imagery in his talks "explicitly linking the modern Jewish state to the terrible charge of deicide that for centuries fueled so much anti-Jewish hatred and bloodshed."¹³⁶

PLT claims that Palestinians represent a "modern-day version of Jesus' suffering" and that Jews are yet again murdering G-d, first in the form of Jesus and now in the form of Palestinians.¹³⁷ They claim that the Jews repeatedly commit deicide when they oppress the Palestinians and treat Palestinians the way they do, an explanation that can be traced to

¹³⁵ The term "deicide" was first coined in the seventeenth century by the Church of England. They codified this centuries-old charge against the Jews in an attempt to convert the Jews to Christianity. They blamed other Christian denominations, such as Catholicism, for their belief that the death of Jesus was necessary in G-d's plan for the salvation of mankind. Because of this view, some argue that G-d himself is responsible for Jesus' death and no human or group of humans should be blamed. However, those who believe that Jews are ultimately responsible use this as a criticism of Jews in general, which has turned into central argument for anti-Semitic groups. (*Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 399-400.)

¹³⁶ Jeff Jacoby, "Criticism Gone Too Far," *Boston Globe*, October 21, 2007, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2007/10/21/criticism_gone_too_far/.

¹³⁷ "Sabeel and Naim Ateek Fact Sheet," NGO Monitor.

Matthew 25:31-46.¹³⁸ Critics of Sabeel believe this to be misguided as well. Many academics and religious leaders still debate the charge of deicide today, typically concluding that it is absurd to blame anyone living today for a murder that occurred two thousand years ago.¹³⁹ Dexter Van Zile argues that charging Jews with deicide translates into a “mistrust” of the Jews that prohibits Sabeel, and Palestine by extension, from negotiating a two-state agreement with Israel.¹⁴⁰ He accuses Sabeel of putting forth a proposal of a two-state solution that looks appealing to both Jews and Arabs and “then regretfully acknowledg[ing] that because of the Jewish parochialism and mistrust, the idea must be discarded.”¹⁴¹ Van Zile believes that Sabeel does this to promote its own goal, which critics believe to be anti-Israel in nature, while attempting to demonstrate that Israel and the Jews are the true blockade on the road to peace.

Application of Apartheid Rhetoric

Furthermore, critics denounce Sabeel’s analogy between the Palestinian situation and apartheid in South Africa. Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* explains apartheid in South Africa as “the racist system through which South Africa’s white minority government ruthlessly repressed the country’s large black majority, denying them political rights and

¹³⁸ These verses cite Jesus’ telling people that they will be saved because they saw Him hungry, thirsty, and without clothes and took care of Him. However, others will not be brought into His kingdom because when they saw Him hungry, thirsty, and without clothes, they did nothing to help Him. Those condemned will ask when they saw him in such a state and did nothing, and Jesus explains that whatever they did or did not do for one of G-d’s children they did or did not do for Him.

¹³⁹ The official church pronouncement on this subject is known as *Nostra Aetate*. This document “repudiates the centuries-old ‘deicide’ charge against all Jews, stresses the religious bond shared by Jews and Catholics, reaffirms the eternal covenant between [G-d] and the People of Israel, and dismisses church interest in trying to baptize Jews.” “Nostra Aetate: What is it?” 20 October 2005.

http://www.adl.org/main_Interfaith/nostra_aetate_whatisit.htm

¹⁴⁰ Dexter Van Zile, “Sabeel’s One State Adgenda,” December 13 2005,

<http://www.c4rpme.org/bin/articles.cgi?Cat=activist-roadblock&Subcat=sabeel&ID=63>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

relegating them to third-class education, housing, and employment.”¹⁴² In short, blacks in South Africa under the apartheid system lived horrible lives with few opportunities. Sabeel, according to critics, tries to hide its anti-Semitism by “elicit[ing] false sympathy by claiming the Palestinians are suffering worse than the blacks did [during the apartheid] in South Africa.”¹⁴³ This line of coercion, as critics call it, is most typically employed at American conferences for Sabeel, since many Americans are aware of, and completely opposed to, the apartheid in South Africa.¹⁴⁴ Critics believe this to be insulting not only to the political system of Israel but also to the entire country of Israel. Israel is a democratic state that is based on “tolerance, individual liberty, and the rule of law,” which stands in stark contrast with the situation that once obtained in South Africa, where tolerance and individual liberties were a distant dream for blacks.¹⁴⁵ In Israel, every citizen regardless of race, ethnic background, or religion can “exercise the right to vote and enjoy identical civil and political liberties.”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, about one member in ten of the Israeli Parliament is Arab.¹⁴⁷ Israel is far more advanced a country in terms of personal liberties and freedom, so the comparison Sabeel makes between Israel and South Africa deeply offends Israelis.

Elimination of Jewish Aspect of Israel

Moreover, many critics raise concerns over the elimination of the Jewish element of the state of Israel should a one-state solution be reached. Israel is currently defined as a Jewish state—something that no other country in the world can claim. Critics maintain

¹⁴² Jacoby, “Criticism Gone Too Far.”

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ It should be noted that apartheid in South Africa is currently outlawed and has been since 1994. Although it is outlawed, Sabeel uses it as a point of comparison to the Palestinian situation under Israeli control today.

¹⁴⁵ Jacoby, “Criticism Gone Too Far.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Sabeel supports a one-state solution in order to “[eliminate] Israel as Jewish state.”¹⁴⁸ Sabeel advocates the safereturn of Palestinians to their rightful homes as stated in the “Jerusalem Sabeel Document,” calling for a homeland for Palestinians where they can live in peace with Israelis. However, Van Zile argues that Sabeel’s true agenda “is the creation of a single state in which Jews would be, by definition, a minority vulnerable to mistreatment by an Arab and Muslim majority.”¹⁴⁹ Some critics believe that Sabeel’s principal goal is to eliminate the Jewishness of the state while others argue that this elimination comes as “an unavoidable byproduct of a single state solution as proposed by Sabeel,” intended or not.¹⁵⁰ Even Edward Said, a pro-Palestinian speaker at Sabeel’s conference in 1998, raised concerns about “the fate of Jews in a single state in which they will invariably become a minority.”¹⁵¹ Critics and advocates alike remain apprehensive of a one-state solution because of the possible troubles for Jews, but they differ on whether this solution will in fact result in a loss of the Jewishness of the state and the subsequent oppression of Jews. It should be noted, however, that PLT does not ask for a one-state solution, as many critics accuse PLT of doing, but instead desires a two-state solution with Jerusalem serving as the shared capital of both states.

Ignoring of Muslim Oppression of Christians

Critics also accuse Sabeel of deliberately ignoring of the treatment of Palestinians and Christians by other Arabs. Most critics agree that “very little Palestinian self-criticism is displayed” during Sabeel conferences and in its writings.¹⁵² Dexter Van Zile raises concerns over Ateek’s “effort to place the mistreatment of Christians by Muslims in the disputed

¹⁴⁸ “Sabeel and Naim Ateek Fact Sheet,” NGO Monitor.

¹⁴⁹ Van Zile, “Sabeel’s One State Adgenda.”

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² “Sabeel’s Rhetoric Questioned by Jewish Peace Activists,” March 28, 2008, http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=2&x_outlet=118&x_article=1472.

territories outside the realm of legitimate discussion” and how this “raises troubling questions about his willingness and ability to speak the truth about Palestinian society.”¹⁵³

Specifically, Van Zile alludes to the violence against Christians in Taybeh in September 2005. In this incident, Muslim extremists torched several houses of Christians in retaliation for an alleged unlawful affair between a Christian man and Muslim woman. When the woman’s family found out she was pregnant with a Christian man’s baby, they murdered her.¹⁵⁴ Although met with opposition, Israelis distributed brochures in Israel about the incident and about the violence committed by the Muslim population. Supposedly, Ateek responded to these actions by accusing these Israelis of unfairly “demonizing Islam” and its people.¹⁵⁵ Because of this incident and others like it, Van Zile raises questions as to whether Sabeel is as open to talking about violence in the Middle East as it claims to be.¹⁵⁶ Many critics believe that Sabeel’s “failure to draw attention to the suffering of Christians under Muslim rule in both the disputed territories and the Middle East” raises serious problems for the legitimacy of its message of democracy and religious tolerance.¹⁵⁷ In reference to Palestinian government, critics worry that PLT never comments on “suicide bombings or the fact that the Arabs have fired hundreds of missiles into Israel since the forced evacuation of the Jews from Gaza [in 2005].”¹⁵⁸ Shelly Neese criticizes Sabeel for not recognizing “that

¹⁵³ Van Zile, “Sabeel’s One State Adgenda.”

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Lee Kaplan, “Sabeel’s West Cost Conference,” accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.dafka.org/new/s/index.php?pid=4&id=1526>.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist government, is a far greater threat to Palestinian Christians than Zionism.”¹⁵⁹

Anti-Israel, Anti-Semitic Activism

Lastly, critics of Sabeel and PLT contend that Sabeel’s goals, at their very core, are driven by hatred of Israel and fierce anti-Semitism. Sabeel’s spokespeople are accused of “demoniz[ing] and delegitimiz[ing] the state of Israel,” leading to participation in and promoting of divestment campaigns.¹⁶⁰ The ADL cites Sabeel as being one of the biggest proponents of divestment from Israel and cites Friends of Sabeel as promoting divestment from Israel in America.¹⁶¹ Divestment, the removing of resources or the refusing to purchase things made in a certain area, mostly achieved through the removal of large investments, sends a clear message of ostracism by isolating a country from the international investment network.¹⁶² Through these divestment campaigns, critics claim, Sabeel seeks to “build a critical mass of influential church leaders who will amplify its message that Israel is solely culpable for the origin and continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict.”¹⁶³ Critics also accuse Sabeel of calling for a two-state solution in public to obtain followers but “in private [calling] for a single state with the Jews under Arab rule.”¹⁶⁴ The *Boston Globe* criticizes Sabeel for simply condemning certain practices without any thought as to the

¹⁵⁹ Shelly Neese, “Palestinian Liberation Theology,” accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.dafka.org/news/index.php?pid=4&id=1417>.

¹⁶⁰ “Sabeel Conferences: Fueling the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” NGO Monitor, last modified October 10, 2007, <http://www.ngo-monitor.org/article.php?id=1661>.

¹⁶¹ “Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center: An ALD Backgrounder,” Anti-Defamation League.

¹⁶² “The Anti-Israel Divestment Campaign,” Anti-Defamation League, last modified October 9, 2006, http://www.adl.org/main_Israel/Divestment_02_17_05.htm.

¹⁶³ “BDS In the Pews: European, US, and Canadian Government Funding Behind Anti-Israel Activism in Mainline Churches,” NGO Monitor, July 2, 2012,

http://www.ngomonitor.org/article/bds_in_the_pews_european_us_and_nadian_government_funding_behind_anti_israel_activism_in_mainline_churches.

¹⁶⁴ Kaplan, “Sabeel’s West Coast Conference.”

usefulness or helpfulness of them. For example, the *Boston Globe* questions why Sabeel so adamantly opposes checkpoints and buffer zones when “they have saved many Israelis, Arabs, and Jews alike from being murdered or maimed.”¹⁶⁵ Jeff Jacoby of the *Boston Globe* explains that the checkpoints, while unpopular and inconvenient, can be removed when the bombings stop and safety of all people can be a certainty while reminding us that “lives lost to suicide bombings can never be replaced.”¹⁶⁶ If Sabeel is so opposed to these buffer zones when these zones have done so much good, Jacoby asks, how concerned is it truly about the safety of all people?¹⁶⁷

Summary of Criticisms

To summarize: critics raise several concerns about the message and goals of Sabeel. How does the message of supersessionism come into play in PLT, and what does that mean for Jews? Why does the issue of deicide arise, and what new spin does Sabeel add? The use of the analogy between Palestinians and blacks living under apartheid South Africa vastly exaggerates, according to critics, the living conditions for most Palestinians. Critics question Sabeel’s objectivity and even-handedness since the group oftentimes ignores how Muslim Arabs mistreat Christians in other areas of the Islamic world. And finally, if Sabeel so blindly opposes Israel that it resists something like buffer zones that save so many lives, how dedicated can it really be to the welfare of all people?

Despite these criticisms, PLT has remained strong in its dedication to Palestine and its people. Though Sabeel has not responded to these criticisms directly, it has made an effort to remove itself from political discussions that do not better the lives and situations of Palestine

¹⁶⁵ Jacoby, “Criticism Gone Too Far.”

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

and its people. Put simply, Sabeel has not directly responded to these criticisms, but this fact is not surprising since Sabeel seems rather uninterested in defending itself as a group and instead focuses all of its efforts on defending Palestine and its people.

Better Alternatives?

Several movements within the Middle East approach the Israeli-Palestinian conflict differently from PLT. The way they assess the conflict and aim to implement social and political changes provide alternatives to PLT, alternatives that suggest possible adjustments to PLT, which can improve its ability to achieve its goals. (These adjustments will be discussed in Chapter 5).

Palestinian Center for Human Rights

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights, a center located in Gaza City, dedicates itself to protecting the rights of people living within the occupied territories. This Center documents human rights violations, provides legal aid for individuals and groups, and prepares articles about human rights issues in Palestine.¹⁶⁸ The Center is formed on the basis of the principles established in the Oslo Accords signed in 1994 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.¹⁶⁹ The Center aims to “protect human rights and promote the rule of law...create and develop democratic institutions and an active civil society...[and] support all the efforts aimed at enabling the Palestinian people to exercise its inalienable rights in regard to self-determination and independence....”¹⁷⁰ They have eight different units with specific tasks, including the women’s unit, the international unit, and the

¹⁶⁸ “About PCHR,” Palestinian Center for Human Rights, accessed February 10, 2013, http://www.pchrgaza.org/port al/en/index.php?option=com_content&view= article&id=3027&Itemid=182.

¹⁶⁹ “Philosophy,” Palestinian Center for Human Rights, accessed February 10, 2013, http://www.pchrgaza.org/port al/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3028&Itemid=176.

¹⁷⁰ “About PCHR,” Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

democratic development unit.¹⁷¹ Many of the units also conduct fieldwork research, which involves gathering stories from the relevant groups and leading workshops on the relevant issues within the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Palestinian Peace Society

The Palestinian Peace Society is a joint Muslim-Christian group operating in the Middle East and North Africa that strives to encourage peace in the Middle East and to break down religious stereotypes in the region.¹⁷² The Society participates in conferences and workshops in Palestine and around the Middle East in order to “clarify the Palestinian sufferings, and to combat the bigotry and extremist, fanatic ideologies among the Palestinian Youth.”¹⁷³ They also organize their own workshops and meetings to encourage Palestinians to understand and speak about their living conditions in a constructive way.¹⁷⁴ In 2008 the members of the Society participated in a gathering of Israeli and Palestinian engineers in order for them to plan for both of their countries’ futures.¹⁷⁵ They also participated in the same year in several interfaith workshops and meetings with the hope of recognizing and celebrating differences and appreciating the similarities between all of the Abrahamic faiths.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ “Organisation & Staff,” Palestinian Center for Human Rights, accessed February 10, 2013, <http://www.pchrgaz>

[a.org/portal/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=54&Itemid=181](http://www.pchrgaz.org/portal/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=54&Itemid=181).

¹⁷² “The Palestinian Peace Society Cooperation Circle,” accessed February 11, 2013, http://www.uri.org/cooperation_circles/detail/palestinianpeacesociety/.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ “The Palestinian Peace Society,” accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.urimena.org/ssubcat.asp?ID=356&Link=178&Link1=141>.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Midwives for Peace

The Midwives for Peace operate within the West Bank, ministering to women in labor who would otherwise not be able to reach hospitals for medical assistance because of the delays caused by the military checkpoints in the area.¹⁷⁷ The midwives participating in the group are guided by the belief that every woman and newborn in both Israel and Palestine deserves safety and access to proper medical care.¹⁷⁸ Training for these midwives is conducted in Israel and Palestine and includes training for prenatal care, delivery, and postpartum health.¹⁷⁹ This organization does not discriminate on the basis of religious or ethnic background for either the midwives or women being cared for.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 5

Reconfiguring Palestinian Liberation Theology

In this chapter, I will consider ways in which PLT may be reconfigured and revised to increase its effectiveness. By changing its name, PLT can adequately reach its target audience without being impeded by the associations with the term “liberation theology.” By broadening its religious foundation, PLT can reach a more universal religious audience, without isolating non-Christians. By incorporating the strongest aspects of alternative groups in Israel-Palestine, PLT can educate a larger audience both inside and outside Israel-Palestine.

What to Change: Categorization as a Liberation Theology

Because nomenclature is important and therefore must be used advisedly, PLT should not be called a liberation theology. For better or worse, liberation theology has taken a specific form determined primarily by its application in Latin America. Based on how it has developed, the term “liberation theology” carries connotations that are neither useful nor applicable in a Palestinian context. Because of negative associations with ideas that do not truly apply to PLT, calling PLT a liberation theology constrains it and hinders it in its purpose. If the term “liberation” were to be removed from the name of the theology, then it could better escape the insinuation of a hostile relationship with Israel and the implications of a Marxist ideology.

The use of the term “liberation” implies a hostile relationship to an oppressor; in Latin America this oppressor was usually the government of the state, while in Israel-Palestine the oppressor is usually considered to be Israel and its practices. However, I do not

believe that PLT assumes quite so jarring a relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians as Latin American liberation theology does between the poor and their respective governments. Although people in the Israeli government and international law forums allow injustices against Palestine to continue, PLT does not focus its attention on eradicating the heads of the Israeli government. Instead, it seeks to persuade the government officials to change their practices and allow Palestinians to live peacefully and safely within the borders of their own state. Calls for wiping out the Israeli government are antithetical to PLT's mission and beliefs. What is notable is PLT's focus on oppressive *practices* as the problem versus liberation theology's focus on oppressive *people* as the problem that needs fixing. How can the peace for which PLT strives be achieved if Palestinians look at Israelis as oppressors rather than as co-workers in the process of achieving peace?

Moreover, as liberation theology developed in Latin America, it developed definite Marxist leanings. In fact, in the minds of most people, these leanings have become inseparable from the Latin American liberation struggle. However, no such Marxist leanings are inherent in PLT—another good reason to suppress the term “liberation” from its name. In short, the differences I have highlighted above beg the question: should PLT be categorized as a liberation theology? I would answer in the negative; to call PLT a liberation theology is both inaccurate and counterproductive.

Broadening PLT's Religious Foundation

Latin American liberation theology has received large doses of both criticism and support from the Catholic Church. Because the actions of liberation theologians reflected both positively and negatively on the Catholic Church, the Church sought to sanction those thinkers who reflected poorly on it and commend those whose actions reflected positively on

it. Consequently, the Church wielded unparalleled control over Latin American liberation theology and its followers.

On the other hand, PLT, though linked with Christianity, is connected to neither the Catholic Church nor any particular Christian denomination. To be sure, it uses the Bible as a foundation for its goals, but it does not fall under the authority of one particular Christian church. Pragmatically, this allows PLT to remain its own identity, uncontrolled by a central body, enabling it to embrace a more universal, inclusive perspective. Nevertheless, if PLT retains “theology” in its name, the powerful symbolic and communitarian bases religion can provide is preserved and adequately conveyed.

“Theology” should be retained because it is so central to the message of PLT. PLT provides a religious alternative to the political and militaristic views prevalent in Palestine among other groups, most notably the PLO and Hamas, both of which present aggressive and often extreme solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. PLT, on the other hand, provides a nonviolent alternative solution.

At the grassroots level, PLT is recognized as a Christian group founded by priests, and that history should not be forgotten. It occasionally seems to have isolated both Jewish and Muslim populations with its distinctively Christian undertone, as indicated by the lack of Friends of Sabeel Centers in Muslim countries, even those with strong Christian populations like Egypt. This need not be the case if PLT takes greater pains to speak in terms common to all the Abrahamic faiths.

In light of all the above considerations, I propose that PLT change its name to Palestinian Co-existence Theology (PCT). If it were to change its name, then it will be

freed it from the yoke of association with Marxism and with too narrow a religious base, thus enabling it more accurately to communicate its vision and aspirations.

What to Integrate

PCT should also aim to integrate methods used by other peace centers discussed in Chapter 4. Several of these factors would help PCT to reach more people and to demonstrate their message while avoiding anti-Semitic insinuations and other offensive language.

For example, PCT could benefit from the work several units of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, each of which conducts its own fieldwork. These units reach out to members of the community in order to gain relevant information to effect change in the sector in which they are operating. The international unit, for example, interviews inhabitants of the occupied territories in order to gain information to challenge Israel in the international law sphere.

If PCT were to conduct such fieldwork, then it could gain stories of how different people in the occupied territories live and how they have responded to issues caused by the occupation. By doing so, it would accumulate ample data on the basis of which it could respond to critics' claims that its concerns are unfounded and simply veiled anti-Semitism. This data would also enable PCT to improve its conferences in other countries with Friends of Sabeel centers by more effectively substantiating its calls to action.

Offering Workshops

The lectures that PLT has offered have not been nearly as comprehensive as workshops, conferences, and academic centers that other peace centers, such as the Palestinian Peace Society, use as a means of reaching potential adherents. If PCT were to use other means of outreach such as workshops, it could open its doors to an entirely new

group of people who could truly work for a change in the political sphere. If these people were formally educated and allowed to meet and talk individually or in small groups with leading scholars and thinkers in the areas of peace studies and conflict resolution, PCT could start to see impressive results.

Another important aspect of the Palestinian Peace Society's lectures and workshops that PCT could adopt is the focus on the Palestinian youth. The younger generation has been deeply affected by the occupation and will soon be the leaders who might well have the power to change the situation. If it were to involve the youth of the area, PCT would be able to foster a new generation of leaders who will continue to strive for Palestinian freedom and peace.

Desegregating Israelis and Palestinians

Midwives for Peace brings together Israeli and Palestinian midwives in order to serve those in need of healthcare. From the start of their participation in the program, the midwives are trained and work together regardless of their nationality. If PCT integrated this practice of blending Israelis and Palestinians in working together for specific concrete purposes they would be able to reach a wider audience and better portray their religiously universal theology.

Future Possibilities

If PLT is reconfigured in some of the ways I have envisioned, it could truly improve the political situation it was meant to address. A change in name to Palestinian Co-existence Theology would allow a disassociation with Latin American liberation theology and its Marxist orientation. It could broaden its religious foundation to reach other religious groups. It could also incorporate practices from other groups in order to be more inclusive and ignite

a passion for peace among Israelis and Palestinians. Christian/Muslim relations could also be enhanced because this could be seen as uniting the Abrahamic faiths for a common goal.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined PLT and Latin American liberation theology in turn. I explored the history of PLT and its tenets. I then turned to the history and development of Latin American liberation theology. I next compared and contrasted the two movements, suggesting how they diverged from each other in their scope of concern, their religious affiliation, their process of formation, their view of the “other,” their targets of criticism, and their goals. Moreover, I looked at criticisms of PLT made by religious scholars, journalists, and pro-Israel activists. Lastly, I concluded that if PLT were to reconfigure itself, it might better reach its audience and achieve its goals.

PLT would benefit from changing its name to Palestinian Co-existence Theology (PCT). This adequately explains the movement’s goal—for all citizens of Israel-Palestine to live together peacefully—without alienating people because of possible associations with Latin American liberation theology. Widening the scope of religious affiliation would allow it to maintain the religious aspect that is so central to PLT while not alienating Jews and Muslims. If PCT incorporated aspects from other Palestinian-based groups, such as should holding conferences and workshops for youth, seeking to intermingle Palestinians and Israelis in its work, and conducting fieldwork to gather first-hand stories, it could better advance the Palestinian cause.

The movement examined in this thesis is a living reality that continues to evolve. In the future I plan to consider its dynamics and how it responds to the various cultural and political movements in Israel-Palestine. With the founding generation of leaders growing old, Sabeel will soon begin an important transition period. New leaders must step forward

and time will tell whether the message of Sabeel has reached the youth of Palestine and whether it will continue to do so in the future.

Appendix 1

Comprehensive Settlement Population 1972-2010¹⁸⁰

Year	West Bank	Gaza Strip	East Jerusalem	Golan Heights	Total
1972	1,182	700	8,649	77	10,608
1983	22,800	900	76,095	6,800	106,595
1985	44,100	1,900	103,900*	8,700	158,700
1989	69,800	3,000	117,100	10,000	199,900
1990	78,600	3,300	135,000	10,600	227,500
1991	90,300	3,800	137,300	11,600	243,000
1992	101,100	4,300	141,000	12,000	258,400
1993	111,600	4,800	152,800	12,600	281,800
1995	133,200	5,300	157,300	13,400	309,200
1996	142,700	5,600	160,400	13,800	322,500
1997	154,400	5,700	161,416	14,300	335,816
1998	163,300	6,100	165,967	14,900	350,267
1999	177,411	6,337	170,123	15,313	369,184
2000	192,976	6,678	172,250	15,955	387,859
2002	214,722	7,277	175,617	16,503	414,119
2003	224,669	7,556	178,601	16,791	427,617
2004	234,487	7,826	181,587	17,265	441,828
2005	258,988	0	184,057	17,793	460,838
2006	268,400	0	186,857	18,105	473,362
2007	276,462	0	189,708	18,692	484,862
2008	295,380	0	193,091	19,083	507,554
2009	299,440	0	191,960	19,248	510,648
2010	314,132	0	198,629	19,797	534,224
2011	328,423	0	n/a	20,347	n/a

*1986 data

Source: [Central Bureau of Statistics](#), *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 1992-2008 and List of Localities, the Populations, and Symbols, 1995-2008. Statistical Yearbook of Jerusalem, Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991-2010

¹⁸⁰ *Comprehensive Settlement Population 1972-2010*. http://www.fmep.org/settlement_info/settlement-info-and-tables/stats-data/comprehensive-settlement-population-1972-2006. (2011).

Appendix 2

The Jerusalem Sabeel Document: Principles for Just Peace in Palestine-Israel

"Seek Peace and Pursue it." (1 Peter 3:11)

In pursuit of peace and out of our faith commitment, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Jerusalem has formulated a set of principles by which we, as Palestinian Christians, feel a just, secure, and lasting peace can be achieved.

Theological Basis

Our faith teaches us that,

1. God, creator and redeemer, loves all people equally (John 3:16, Acts 17:24-28).
2. God demands that justice be done. No enduring peace, security, or reconciliation is possible without the foundation of justice. The demands of justice will not disappear; and the struggle for justice must be pursued diligently and persistently but non-violently (Jeremiah 9:23-24, Isaiah 32:16-17, Romans 12:17-21).
3. The Holy Land is God's gift to Palestinians and Israelis. They must live justly and mercifully and be good stewards of it (Micah 6:8).
4. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is an inclusive principle that must be honored and sought after (Mark 12:31). The Golden Rule continues to apply, "Do to others what you want them to do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

5. Faithfulness to God obliges us to work for justice, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing (Matthew 5:9, 43-45).

Moral Basis

1. We acknowledge the sufferings and injustices committed against Jews by the West, especially those inflicted in the holocaust. Nevertheless, they do not justify the injustices committed against Palestinians. Justice claimed by one people at the expense of another is not justice.
2. Since Israel has, by force, displaced the Palestinians, destroyed their villages and towns, denied them their basic human rights, and illegally dominated and oppressed them, it is morally bound to admit its injustice against the Palestinians and assume responsibility for it.
3. Since Israel acquired by force 77% of the land of Palestine in 1948, approximately 20% more than the United Nations had allotted, and established its state there, it is moral and right for Israel to return the whole of the areas captured in 1967, i.e. the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem, to the millions of Palestinians who need their own small sovereign state.
4. Israel's 'Law of Return' which allows any Jewish person to immigrate to Israel while denying Palestinians the right of return to their homeland is immoral and discriminatory.
5. Sharing the sovereignty of Jerusalem is imperative to a moral and just peace.

6. The ideology of militarism as well as the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction are morally wrong. They sabotage the spirit and viability of peace and will not provide security either.

Legal Basis: International Legitimacy

The following principles have been affirmed and repeatedly reaffirmed by the international community:

1. Palestinian refugees have the right of return -- UN General Assembly Resolution 194.
2. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are occupied territories and the Israeli forces must withdraw from them -- UN Security Council Resolution 242 and 338 based on the international principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.
3. The Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are illegal. Moreover, it is illegal for the occupying power to transfer its population to, or to change the status of, the occupied territories – Fourth Geneva Convention.
4. East Jerusalem is occupied territory. Israel's unilateral actions to alter the status of Jerusalem are illegal and invalid -- UN Security Council Resolutions 252 and 478.
5. Violations of human rights such as home demolitions, land confiscation, torture, revocation of residency rights, restriction of movement, closures, and the monopolization of resources are an insult to the dignity of human beings and contravene international law -- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Principles for Which Sabeel Stands

The people of the region--Palestinians and Israelis--both need and deserve a lasting peace, and security. With peace and security in place, bonds of acceptance and friendship can grow. It is no service to either community to promote a peace which flouts international law, ignores justice, and ultimately cannot endure since this will lead to continued bitterness and violence.

The following principles are therefore, based on international legitimacy. The international community has a responsibility to see that they are fulfilled. Once achieved, the strongest international guarantees must be given to ensure that the people of Palestine and Israel will live in peace and security.

1. Israel must admit that it has committed an injustice against the Palestinian people and must accept responsibility for that. This means that reparation must be paid to all Palestinians who have suffered as a result of the conflict since 1948 whether they are Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians living on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or Palestinians living in the Diaspora. The road to healing and reconciliation passes through repentance, forgiveness and redress.
2. The Palestinians must have their own sovereign, independent, and democratic state established on the whole of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Israel must withdraw to the June 4, 1967 borders. No solution is acceptable if it does not guarantee the Palestinians' and Israelis' right to self-determination, independence, and sovereignty.

3. Jerusalem's sovereignty must be shared by the two states of Palestine and Israel. The city must remain open for Palestinians, Israelis, and all. East Jerusalem can be the capital of Palestine while West Jerusalem can be the capital of Israel. Any agreement must protect the sanctity of the holy places and guarantee the rights of the three religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism on an equal basis. All illegal confiscation of land or expansion of areas by Israel within the walled city of Jerusalem since 1967 must be reversed.
4. The right of return to Palestinian refugees must be guaranteed according to international law. All refugees must be fully compensated.
5. All Israeli Jewish settlements on the Gaza Strip and West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are illegal under international law. All the settlements built on Palestinian soil since 1967 must be part of Palestine.
6. Once the principles of an acceptable justice are applied, a peace treaty must be drawn up between the two states of Palestine and Israel guaranteeing the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of each including recognized borders, water rights, and other resources.
7. Furthermore, both states must fully guarantee the respect and protection of the human rights of all their citizens, including freedom of religion, in accordance with all international conventions.

Political Background

In 1948 a grievous injustice was committed by the Zionists (forerunners of the state of Israel) against the Palestinian people. The Zionists acquired by force 77% of the land of Palestine

and displaced three quarters of a million Palestinians. Consequently, the state of Israel was declared as a Jewish state. Since then, most of the displaced Palestinians have lived in refugee camps and their national rights have been denied. Despite UN Resolution 194, passed in December 1948 and reaffirmed annually by the UN, Israel has adamantly refused the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes. The 150,000 Palestinians who remained within that part of Palestine which became the state of Israel were given Israeli citizenship. However, they have been discriminated against and have been treated as second class citizens.

In 1967, the state of Israel acquired by force the rest of the country of Palestine (the 23%) further displacing approximately 325,000 Palestinians. The Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank came under Israeli military rule. The occupation has been oppressive, brutal, and dehumanizing. Palestinian land has been systematically confiscated, human rights violated, and people systemically humiliated, as documented by a number of international, Israeli, and Palestinian human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, B'Tselem, LAW and Al-Haq. Furthermore, Israel assumed control of Palestine's water supply (unfairly restricting water to Palestinians and charging them exorbitant prices), began building exclusively Jewish settlements on Palestinian land and, through hundreds of military laws, persisted in its oppression of the Palestinians. As to East Jerusalem, Israel annexed it and, in 1993, closed it and cut it off from the rest of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, thus denying Palestinians the right of access to it. Consequently, even the right to worship in its churches and mosques is obstructed. Moreover, Israel enacted a policy to limit the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem to 27% of the city's population, through

demolition of homes, confiscation of land, revocation of Palestinian residency rights as well as other means.

In 1991 at the end of the Gulf War, the peace process was initiated by the United States and Russia. In spite of its initial promise in the Madrid Conference to achieve a just peace, it became, in its Oslo form, an instrument for furthering the injustice. As it evolved, certain portions of the occupied territories were returned by Israel to the Palestinian Authority. By the end of March 2000, only 18.2% of the area of the West Bank has been returned to full Palestinian Authority; 24.7% is under Israeli security and Palestinian civil control. The remaining 57.1% of the West Bank is still under full Israeli control. The areas that have been returned to the Palestinians are not geographically linked together. The Israeli Army controls the highways and major roads throughout the occupied territories, as well as everything below the ground and sky above. It is important to note that in the Gaza Strip, only 60% of the land is under Palestinian control where over a million Palestinians live; while Israel controls the 40% of the Strip for the benefit of 6100 Jewish settlers. Furthermore, some of the 194 Israeli settlements (166 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and 28 in East Jerusalem - - all illegal under international law) have expanded to sizable towns. It is estimated that the number of settlers, including those who live in the settlement ring in and around Jerusalem, is approximately 400,000.

The two sides, Israelis and Palestinians, have more recently been engaged in the final status negotiations which include the thorniest issues, namely, Jerusalem, borders, refugees, water, and settlements.

We feel we are standing at a most important juncture in our history. The United States Government has been working to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Syria as well as to keep alive the negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Many of us are afraid that what might ensue in Palestine is an unjust peace. We at Sabeel feel we have a Christian responsibility to speak our mind for the sake of a lasting peace that will bring an acceptable justice to the Palestinians and security for all the peoples of our region. We fear that the Palestinian Authority might be forced to accept an unjust peace which will be attractively packaged by the state of Israel and the United States Government. We are, however, sure that an unjust peace will only be temporary and will inevitably plunge our region into greater violence and bloodshed. We will not be silent. We lift our voice prophetically in pointing to the pitfalls of injustice. The following points comprise the different scenarios. We would like to present them clearly with their probable consequences.

The Greatest Concern: A bantustan state

Taking a good look at the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, it is clear that Israel's eye is focused on the West Bank which includes East Jerusalem. The confiscation of Palestinian land, the building and expansion of the settlements have never stopped. Israel continues to insist that the settlements will remain under Israeli rule. If this is done, Israel will maintain its military presence on the West Bank while allowing the Palestinian Authority to have autonomous rule over its own people. The areas under Palestinian rule will be called Palestine. They will have the semblance of a state but will exist under the suzerainty of Israel and will not enjoy genuine sovereignty. What we are witnessing, therefore, is a bantustan-type state, home rule,

just like what was proposed by the former apartheid government of South Africa to its black citizens. From all indications, this is the picture which is emerging on the ground.

If pressured, Israel may even concede the Gaza Strip, where it currently has only 6100 settlers and controls approximately 40% of the land and one third of the water. It might withdraw totally from the Gaza Strip, which now has a damaged aquifer and a serious lack of usable water, and allow the Palestinians to have their sovereign state there. That area will be small and contained in one corner of Palestine and, from Israel's perspective, will, presumably, not pose any serious threat to Israel. On the West Bank, however, the Palestinians will only be given autonomous rule, a homeland, in the guise of a state yet void of actual sovereignty.

This we believe is an unnatural, unhealthy, and unjust scenario and will only lead to a bloodier conflict. History teaches us that oppressed nations will not give up their struggle for freedom and independence. Under this scenario, Israel will not achieve the security it seeks because the forced and unjust peace settlement cannot be permanent.

Sabeel rejects outright this peace formula or any variation of it and warns that its imposition will be ultimately catastrophic for both peoples.

The Genuine Hope: Two sovereign and fully democratic states

This scenario envisages the total withdrawal of Israel from all the occupied territories including East Jerusalem according to United Nations resolutions 242 and 338. The Palestinians will establish their sovereign state on the whole of the 23% of the land of

Palestine. One way to redeem the settlements is to make them the new towns for the returning Palestinian refugees. This can constitute a part of Israel's reparations to the Palestinians. Israel must compensate the owners from whom the land was confiscated. The Jewish settlers who choose to remain in Palestine can become Palestinian citizens and live under Palestinian sovereignty.

As to Jerusalem, it will have to be shared. The city must remain open to all. A peace treaty will be drawn up and the two countries will become inter-dependent economically and will help each other develop their resources for the well being of both their peoples.

This is the formula which the Palestinians have been hoping and working for. Indeed, it is not the ideal solution, but it carries within it an acceptable justice which most Palestinians are willing to live with for the sake of peace and prosperity. Furthermore, as this scenario agrees with United Nations resolutions since 1967, it will ensure the support of the international community of nations. This formula gives the Palestinians a state as sovereign as Israel, rids them of the Israeli occupation, and restores to them the whole of the occupied territories of 1967. Indeed, a state within the West Bank and Gaza, composed of only 23% of Palestine instead of the 43% allotted by the UN in 1947, is already a very significant compromise by the Palestinians. The Palestinians would have to give up their right to most of historic Palestine. Obviously, Israel, with the help of the United States and the international community, will have to compensate the Palestinian people.

The Vision for the Future

Our vision involves two sovereign states, Palestine and Israel, who in the future may choose to enter into a confederation or even a federation, possibly with other neighboring countries and where Jerusalem becomes the federal capital. Indeed, the ideal and best solution has always been to envisage ultimately a bi-national state in Palestine-Israel where people are free and equal, living under a constitutional democracy that protects and guarantees all their rights, responsibilities, and duties without racism or discrimination. One state for two nations and three religions.

Standing for Justice

At every turn, the principle of justice must be upheld. Unless justice is rendered and security is achieved, the solution must be rejected because it will not endure. A just solution must include an equal measure of justice and security for both sides to make it viable. Otherwise it will not lead to a permanent peace. This is the basic principle that must be upheld and used as the measure for every one of the above points.

This is where Sabeel takes its stand. We will stand for justice. We can do no other. Justice alone guarantees a peace that will lead to reconciliation and a life of security and prosperity to all the peoples of our land. By standing on the side of justice, we open ourselves to the work of peace; and working for peace makes us children of God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

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