

## **On not abandoning Jews and Palestinians**

### **Anna Karin Hammar, Church of Sweden**

My relation to Jews and Palestinians, my views on - and understanding of - this subject goes back to a personal experience during a private trip to Prague and a stop at the city's oldest synagogue. I vividly remember the day in the 90s when I stood there in what is perhaps the most ancient synagogue in Europe, and I prayed to God: open my heart, that I may never desert either Jews or Palestinians.

My life and my work had brought me in close contact with both Jews and Palestinian Christians. As a students' chaplain in Lund in the 80s, I had met radical Jewish students from the USA who shared the concern and alarm at what was going on in Jerusalem with the establishment of illegal Jewish settlements in and around the city. In the 90s, I came to know several members of the Jewish congregation in Malmö participating in an interfaith network meeting in each other's spiritual home.

My first visit to Palestine and Israel was in 1988, three months after the beginning of the Intifada on the West Bank, the uprising against the Israeli occupation policy. My guide was Doris Salah, general secretary of the YWCA, who met me at the airport and already on the way to Jerusalem showed me where the Palestinian villages had been and told me of the memories of the Nakbah, the Catastrophe, in 1948-49, when the Palestinians became refugees, a displaced people. The feeling of being expelled and deserted was further intensified by the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, and the Golan Heights in 1967 during the Six Days War, in Arabic Naksa, the Setback.<sup>1</sup>

That day, in the old synagogue in Prague, I prayed that I, being part of a Western anti-Jewish Christian tradition, would never abandon the Jews, and that my love of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Christians that I had come to know during my years at the World Council of Churches would be equally faithful. That is a prayer that I have needed to repeat time and again. It is not an easily answered prayer for a West European Christian whose history has so often deserted them both.

### **Abandoning the Jews**

My father was a convinced anti-Nazi. Still, the Holocaust and murder of six million Jews casts a shadow on all European Christians. The *Judensau*, the Jewish sow in Uppsala cathedral, is a folk art image in the anti-Jewish Christian tradition which has been alive since the beginning of Christianity. Anti-Judaism must not be confused with anti-Semitism, a term not sanctioned/defined either by the UN nor by the EU but

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<sup>1</sup> PASSIA, *Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, Jerusalem 1995, pp.196; pp.251. cf Göran Gunner & Per Wirtén, *Resa på helig mark. En resehandbok till Israel/Palestina*, Verbum 1990 and *Palestine & Palestinians*, Alternative Tourism Group, Beit Sahour/Ramallah, Palestine, April 2005

often associated with the eugenics and racial biology of the 18th and 19th centuries. The Christian church has always embraced baptized Jews, but the anti-Judaism within the Church has inevitably been a stimulus to later anti-Semitic outbursts based on racial biology. This insight caused the vicar in Malmö to ban the singing of the *Improperia* on Good Friday in all churches in the parish of Malmö.<sup>2</sup> The *Improperia*, by Palestrina, are traditionally sung on Good Friday. They consist of accusations that Christ's own people, mostly considered to be Jews, were the ones who murdered Jesus. There are traces of such accusations in the New testament; St Matthew says: And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt 27.25). Those words have often been understood as saying that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death.<sup>3</sup> The accusations pronounced in the *Improperia* probably derive from the apocryphal Gospel according to Peter, where the Jews carry out the execution of Jesus, not the Roman occupying power as in the four Gospels in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament is not anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism comes later. In the New Testament it is usually Jews that give vent to their hatred of Jews. Even if other translations and interpretations of the term *hoi Ioudaioi* in the Gospel according to John could eliminate some of the stumbling-blocks, it is still extremely evident that the original text carries serious conflict.<sup>5</sup> The use of language in the New Testament blames the Jews, and when those words are read in contexts other than intra-Jewish, they appear to imply dissociation from Jews and all things Jewish in a way quite different from when they are read in an intra-Jewish context. How come?

I find that it is the processing of the anxiety aroused amidst the believers in Christ, in the early Church, when He came to his own house, and his own people received him not (Jn 1.11). Those Jews who do not believe in Jesus as Christ cause anxiety among the believers, which makes them distance themselves from Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kyrkanstidning.se/inrikes/improperierna-slopas-i-malmo-i-pask> (27 March) 2015-04-23

<sup>3</sup> Tord Fornberg, "Vem bar ansvaret för Jesu död?", *Juden Jesus – Jesus the Jew*, 14 January-30 September 2013, Judiska Muséet, Stockholm, pp. 93-101

<sup>4</sup> Jesper Svartvik, *Försoning och förvandling*, Verbum 2014, p. 112

<sup>5</sup> Jesper Svartvik, *Bibeltolkningens bakgator. Synen på judar, slavar och homosexuella i historia och nutid*, Verbum 2006, pp. 63

This is the root of the conflict suggested already in the New Testament. Christianity separates itself from Judaism in a way that indicates increasing animosity.<sup>6</sup>

The Gospel of St Mark, the oldest of the four Gospels, handles this using the so called Messianic secret, namely that Jesus is commanding his followers to silence about his Messianic mission. The fact that he is Messiah is to be revealed later.<sup>7</sup> Maybe there are hopes that, in the meantime, more Jews will come to believe in Jesus as Messiah.<sup>8</sup>

The Gospel according to St John, written down in about the year 90, reflects the most serious conflict. In a paradoxical way, John shows his sincere appreciation of Jewish life and Jewish holy festivals and, also, great animosity. It is now evident that there are many Jews who do not believe in Jesus as Christ.<sup>9</sup> Hostility towards the non-believers is increasing. The Jewish-Christian dialogue has since mainly tried to deal with the harmful effects of this hostility.

Although the current situation in many parts of the world appears to suggest otherwise, I am still convinced that we live in a time when hermeneutic humility is a possibility. It does not have to be either – or, right or wrong. There is space for more interpretations of God and of Life. I think that the idea of one and only one Truth has clouded the days of humankind more than we have really understood.

In my thesis for the doctorate about baptism, I struggle to see baptism as an important action for Christians without estranging others who are not baptized and who do not experience the calling to be Christian but rather identify themselves otherwise. They may be Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists or something else.<sup>10</sup> The concept of *particular universalism* that I found in the writings of Ola Sigurdson, has helped me see that we, as Christians, can embrace a comprehensive or universal

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<sup>6</sup> Henrik Bachner, ”Judefrågan”. *Debatt om antisemitism i 1930-talets Sverige*, Atlantis Stockholm 2009;

(transl:) The root of anti-Judaism is to be found in the conflict that started when Christianity separated itself from its Jewish maternal religion and established itself as an independent competing monotheism ... Christians identified themselves as the ‘new’ or ‘True Israel’, as a ‘new covenant’ replacing the ‘old’. The Jewish mission was seen to be fulfilled with the arrival of Christ. The conversion of the Jews, however, was important for the legitimacy of the new religion. When this didn’t really happen, it caused bitterness. The Jews’ no to Christ was a threat to Christianity’s claim on Truth. The response to the challenge was a theology that attacked Judaism and demonized the Jews

<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown et al, *The Jerome Biblical Commentaries*, Vol II, pp. 22

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, ”The Gospel according to Mark”, Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, pp 50

<sup>9</sup> ”... the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish of the Gospels”, Adele Reinhartz in ”The Gospel according to John”, in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, p. 152

<sup>10</sup> Anna Karin Hammar, *Skapelsens mysterium, Skapelsens sakrament. Dopteologi i mötet mellan tradition och situation*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 22, Uppsala universitet 2009

view of life and of existence depending on our own particular narrative. This is our contribution to the healing of the world. Other traditions have their own narratives. Together, we seek the Truth and we seek God who is greater than we can ever understand or imagine. All religions and all traditions today need humility in their claims on the Truth. We can suggest candidates for the Truth, but we cannot own the Truth. God is greater.<sup>11</sup> My friend Hans Ucko has put it more flatly. "I am God's favourite? C'est passé."<sup>12</sup> Meaning: would one particular religious group be first in the queue before God? That is no longer a realistic thought.

So, how are we to respond to those who do not believe what I believe, who do not believe like the "we" that "we" embrace? That is, in my view, the very core of the anti-Judaism in the Church. From the painful realization that all do not share the same belief emerges the identity of the Christian Church, against the increasingly negative backdrop of practising Jewish believers. The Western Church has then, according to Katharina von Kellenbach, either made the Jews scapegoats or painted all things Jewish as a negative background to the positive interpretation of all things Christian, or simply considered Judaism to be outdated, since those predestined for salvation are now among the Christians.<sup>13</sup> This is where the concept of *replacement theology* comes in. The Christian Church replaces Judaism. What we may call "estranging" has been practiced until death in the history of Western civilization: the way we now see the so called Islamic State and al Qaeda groups persecute and murder people of other faiths, for no other reason than their faith. And this includes even people of different Muslim traditions.

St Augustine (353-430) was the first to observe that the Jews' continued existence was of God's own making. The Jews continued to be Jews because God himself wanted it. God used them as an educational example to show that this is what happens to those who do not accept Christ. That was a theology of contempt. Their calamity proved that the Church was right and the Jews, who did not accept Christ, were wrong. St Augustine would go as far as accepting that the Jews, in carrying forward the Scriptures, were the librarians of the Christian Church, providing the old biblical literature.<sup>14</sup>

With Martin Luther (1483-1546), the Church's anti-Judaism reaches its climax. His – fairly late – work "On the Jews and their Lies" (1543) is used, if I am correct, almost word by word in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. It is painful reading, and for the

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<sup>11</sup> Anna Karin Hammar, *Skapelsens mysterium, Skapelsens sakrament. Dopteologi i mötet mellan tradition och situation*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 22, Uppsala universitet 2009 pp 18, 167

<sup>12</sup> Conversation with Hans Ucko, 21 April 2015

<sup>13</sup> Katharina von Kellenbach in *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, as quoted in Jesper Svartvik, *Bibeltolkningens bakgator. Synen på judar, slavar och homosexuella i historia och nutid*, Verbum 2006, pp.71

<sup>14</sup> Jesper Svartvik, *Bibeltolkningens bakgator. Synen på judar, slavar och homosexuella i historia och nutid*, Verbum 2006, pp. 71

Jews to be subject to such a programme of persecution and murder was infernal – and almost exactly repeated and carried out during the Crystal Night. Earlier in his life, Martin Luther had produced a more favourably disposed work about Jews, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (1523).<sup>15</sup> Possibly, he thought that the Jews, through the Reformation, would convert to the Christian faith. When that did not happen, he turned against them, fuming with rage. In Nazi Germany, the so called Confessing Church and Dietrich Bonhoeffer repudiated the persecution of Jews, but they were too few to make any real difference.

No doubt, the main impression is that, to a large extent, the Western Christian Church has let the Jews down during various periods of persecution in the course of history.

### **Abandoning the Palestinians**

My first contacts with the Palestinian people were, mainly, through the Christians. The Christians, today, are a minority group among the Palestinians, but it is a group with a two thousand-year old Church history.<sup>16</sup> And this is where we come to the deceit by the Western Church. We Christians in the West have neglected the Palestinians' Church history. We have failed to recognize this continuous Christian presence in the Holy Land, ever since the first Pentecost. The Christian Palestinians are proud of this continuing presence.

Nora Kort writes in the latest issue of the *Cornerstone*: "I come from a family that is deeply rooted in Jerusalem, with a presence that dates back to Pentecost."<sup>17</sup> The Christians in Bethlehem often feel the same way. And also in the villages known with a continuous Christian presence, Taybeh and Ein Arik, among others. One of the most perfidious acts committed by Western Christians is, of course, the 1099 crusade when Jews, orthodox Christians, and Muslims were killed, all with equal fury. This was a prelude to what was to befall the orthodox Christians in Constantinople in early 13th century.

Mitri Raheb, Palestinian theologian and director of cultural institutions and a university in Bethlehem, visited Sweden in February of this year, in connection with the Uppsala Festival of Theology. His visit drew great public attention. Mitri Raheb

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<sup>15</sup> Jesper Svartvik, *Bibeltolkningens bakgator. Synen på judar, slavar och homosexuella i historia och nutid*, Verbum 2006, pp. 75

<sup>16</sup> Habib Badr (chief editor), *Christianity, A History in the Middle East*, Middle East Council of Churches, Beirut 2005 (934 pages); Rania Al Qass Collings, Rifat Odeh Kassis, Mitri Raheb, *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, Facts, Figures and Trends*, Diyar Publisher 2012; Johnny Mansour, *Arab Christians in Israel, Facts, Figures and Trends*, Diyar Publisher 2012; cf Viola Raheb, *Latin Americans with Palestinian Roots*, Diyar Publisher 2012

<sup>17</sup> Nora Kort in "Existence, Presence and Steadfastness" in *Cornerstone*. Issue 71, Spring 2015, p.10

associates the Palestinian people's continuing presence not only with the Christian Palestinians but with Am Haaretz, the people of the Land. He belongs to a research tradition rooted in the Palestinian Oriental Society established in 1920, whose researchers were convinced that the people of the Land, and the Palestinian farmers in particular, represented the living heritage of the total of all old civilizations ever present in Palestine. The members of this international group of researchers mention in particular the Kanaanean, the Philistine, the Hebrew, the Nabataean, the Syro-Aramaic, and the Arab civilization.<sup>18</sup> To them, Palestine was not "a land without a people".<sup>19</sup> The Palestinians were the descendants of the people of the Land. The Palestinians (Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike) are Am Haaretz. Not as a nationalistic ideology but as an intellectual discourse, closer to sociology and ethnology than to political science. But the Palestinians were to pay dearly for Europe's sins against the Jews.

Mitri Raheb writes: "...the whole discourse of seeing the Palestinian peasants as the heirs of the land and of the preceding civilizations was totally lost."<sup>20</sup> Instead, there were post-Holocaust theologies developed by Jurgen Moltmann and Paul van Buren based on Karl Barth's idea that today's Jews represented the biblical Israel.<sup>21</sup> Jews were identified with biblical Israel without differentiating them from the modern state of Israel.

The consequence of Nakbah, the Catastrophe, is that the Palestinian presence in the country is made invisible, and that they are also being driven away. No less than 418 villages are destroyed and large numbers of Palestinians become refugees. Many stay behind, however.<sup>22</sup>

The occupation of what remains of Palestine begins in 1967. Another serious setback, Naksa in Arabic. The Kairos document of 2009 says clearly that the occupation is a sin against God.<sup>23</sup> The question is, however, whether the ex-general secretary of MECC (Middle East Council of Churches) is not right in saying: "The

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<sup>18</sup> Mitri Raheb, *The Invention of History. A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics in Palestine*, Diyar Publisher 2011, pp.14

<sup>19</sup> The colonial myth, "a land without a people for a people without a land"

<sup>20</sup> Mitri Raheb, *The Invention of History. A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics in Palestine*, Diyaar Publisher 2011, p.20

<sup>21</sup> Paul Nadim Tarazi in "Hermeneutical Shifts vis-à-vis Palestine in the Twentieth Century, Romans 9.11", in Mitri Raheb, *The Invention of History. A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics in Palestine*, Diyar Publisher, Bethlehem, Palestine, 2011, pp. 170

<sup>22</sup> *PASSIA, Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*, Jerusalem 1995, p.198

<sup>23</sup> Sune Fahlgren, *Ett sannings ögonblick. Kairos Palestina*, Studieförbundet Bilda 2010, p.23

very worst for the Palestinian Christians is the divine sanctioning of their sufferings.”<sup>24</sup>

This is where we Christians in the Western world have often deserted the Palestinians in sanctioning, by divine right, that they be driven away, robbed of their land and robbed of a life of freedom and dignity. Referring to the religious discourse concerning the Jewish affinity to the Holy Land and using it in a political context, Western Christians have often seen the expulsion of the Palestinians as a necessary part of God’s plan.

Politically speaking, the West has abandoned the Palestinians in that a great number of UN resolutions have been produced but never carried into effect, often blocked by Israel together with the US which has the power of veto.

As long ago as in 1917, the Balfour declaration talks in plain British colonial language of a national home for the Jewish people, and ”it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities.” i.e. nothing must negatively affect the rights of the local inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>

One serious betrayal by Western Christians towards the Palestinians is hence the Christian Zionism, proclaiming that, by virtue of the promises of God and God’s sovereign choice, the Jews have a divine right to the Land.

In signing the document *God’s Ways* in 2001, the General Synod of the Church of Sweden has dissociated itself from Christian Zionism. The Committee for Ecumenical Affairs said very clearly, and this is now the policy of the Church of Sweden, that the question of land cannot be solved neither by religious law and argumentation nor by historical law and argumentation, but only by international law.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the General Synod of 2012, in full accordance with international law, supported the recognition of Palestine as a member state of the UN, before the Swedish government made the move to recognize the State of Palestine.<sup>27</sup>

## **From abandoning to solidarity**

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<sup>24</sup> Source: Hans Ucko, 21 April 2015

<sup>25</sup> <http://history1900s.about.com/cs/holocaust/balfourdeclare.htm> 2015-04-23

<sup>26</sup> (transl:) ”When the Committee was discussing the question of land it was pointd out ... that the Church of Sweden must strongly reject any discussion where the aim is to defend claims on land using historical or religious arguments. Jerusalem and many other holy places in Israel-Palestine are holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Claims on these places, as well as other regions, cannot ethically be based on other than the principles of international law.”*Ekumenikuskottets betänkande 2001:1 Guds vägar – judendom och kristendom*

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=94480> 2015-04-23

What does the path away from abandoning to solidarity look like?

I will soon come to a 7-point agenda, but before I do, I want to emphasize that the work carried out against anti-Semitism in Europe and against the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people must be made equally wholeheartedly. What I mean is that if the Palestinians are to be required to break with the anti-Jewish discourse of the Church regarding theology, hymns and songs and stop the Church legitimizing things anti-Jewish, then the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the West must be equally required to position itself decidedly against Israel's oppression of the Palestinians. Western Christians must stop blaming Palestinian Christians for the increasing anti-Judaism mainly in the Western Church and with origins in the Western church. For centuries, the Holy Land has been characterized not by pogroms but by peaceful religious coexistence under various occupying powers.

Furthermore, in my opinion, a power analysis must be made. In a way, that is what Mitri Raheb does in his book *Faith in the Face of Empire*. He refers to the post-colonial tradition and sees Israel as one in a line of empires and gives a detailed account of the attributes of an empire – an affirmation of this post-colonial tradition from a thirty-year long perspective on life under occupation and an attempt to understand the reality in which his parishioners live.<sup>28</sup>

Mitri Raheb's theology has been labelled "extremely contextual".<sup>29</sup> I can't but quote from Mitri Raheb's preface in one of his sixteen books, the one about the siege of Bethlehem: "*I am not sure if it is my destiny to write books during difficult times. But writing in such a context becomes an act of nonviolent resistance: resisting being silenced, resisting being a spectator, and resisting giving up. Writing under siege overcomes the siege imposed on us, and publishing while the apartheid-like wall is being built enables me, in a sense, to transcend the wall.*"<sup>30</sup>

Mitri Raheb's theology is contextual, and so are those of all the others who express their opinion on these questions, consciously or not. Mitri Raheb's theology is not extreme, the *situation* is extreme, and the burden must not be placed on Mitri

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<sup>28</sup> Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire. The Bible through Palestinian Eyes*, Orbis Books, New York 2014. In Swedish translation: *Tro under ockupation. Palestinsk bibeltolkning*, Verbum 2015

<sup>29</sup> Helene Egnell repeats twice this term in her article (transl.) "How many balls can we keep in the air?" in *Svensk Kyrkotidning*, 17 April 2015, p.121

<sup>30</sup> Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem besieged. Stories of Hope in Times of Trial*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2004, p.vii

Raheb's shoulders but where it belongs, in post-colonial words: on the Empire and on all those who maintain the situation as it is, or even make it worse.<sup>31</sup>

What does the path away from abandoning to solidarity look like? In addition to prayer, which, I believe, is the fundament of everything, I suggest the following seven-point agenda:

1. Do not sing the *Improperia* unless they are substantially reworded and freed of anti-Judaism!
2. Make a new edition of the Gospel book where the texts show consideration for Jews and other minority groups and where the language is inclusive (keep the printed Bible version as it is but suggest alternative wording, i.e. suggest how the texts can be *read* aloud in the service, so that the Church takes responsibility ethically for how the texts sound today.
3. Support BDS, i.e. boycott, divestment and sanctions, that like in the case of South Africa may help to undo the oppression, in this case the Occupation of Palestine.<sup>32</sup>
4. Recognize everybody's right to live in peace, justice and security and with safe borders in Israel and in Palestine.<sup>33</sup>
5. Invest both time and money in study visits and friendship with the Christians and with the Churches in Palestine and in all of the Middle East. The situation there is critical, almost infernal.
6. Encourage the production of a Palestinian ecumenical commentary on the texts for the liturgical year – there is still so much preserved of the biblical world in the language and in people's life in Palestine and, as Mitri Raheb says, this may be the last generation of Christian Palestinians who would be able to pass on that tradition.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf Joerg Rieger's definition: "... empire – understood as massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life and which cannot be controlled by one actor alone." In *Empire. The Christian Tradition. New Readings of Classical Theologians*, Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, Fortress Press, 2007 p.3

<sup>32</sup> Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) cf the declaration of the Central committee of the World Council of Churches already in 1992 pointing out the criticizing Israel is not criticizing Judaism. In Sweden, Göran Rosenberg, polemizing with Henrik Bachner and othes, has emphasized that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism

<sup>33</sup> Cf Sune Persson, political scientist in Gothenburg, author of *Palestinakonflikten*, said towards the end of his life that resolution 181 could be interpreted as saying that all parties could live together in economic union and respecting each other, a kind of one-state solution. Cf also *Parallell states project*, Matthias Mossberg et al, University of Lund. Until such a solution has proved possible, it is an imperative of international law that the balance obtained through the acknowledgment of two states be maintained.

7. Encourage an interfaith dialogue that strengthens hermeneutic humility and the sharing of human vulnerability, decisively repudiating any violation of human dignity and human rights, including anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism and the denial of the Palestinian people's human rights.

The Rev. Anna Karin Hammar, Th.D.

Diocesan officer of Pastoral care and Spiritual Accompaniment,

Initiator of the biannual Uppsala Festival of Theology.

Church of Sweden - The Diocese of Uppsala