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Silence is Complicity: Theological Failure in the Face of Genocide

Abstract

In this article, we argue that public theologians have a rich tradition from which to argue for the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. In particular, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance to the co-opting of Christianity by the Nazi regime is frequently cited in theological circles as an exemplar. Yet, we find major public figures and theological societies, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the UK's Society for the Study of Theology (SST) to be wanting in this regard. From an examination of Welby's comments on the Israeli bombardment in Gaza, and the SST's response to our open letter and the lament from Palestinian Christians, we argue that theologians are failing. We draw on Palestinian liberation theology and anticolonial theologies to argue that the work of liberation is the *raison d'être* of theology and requires political activism. We conclude, therefore, that theological silence is complicity in injustice.

Keywords

Palestine, Bonhoeffer, Welby, Cone, Munther Isaac, liberation theology, anticolonial, silence, justice

Introduction

In this article we identify problematic inaction and/or phrasing by key theological figures and learned societies in the face of what is ostensibly the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza being committed by the Israeli forces. We believe that theologians have a rich tradition of justice on which to draw to argue and act for the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. Yet, by examining the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Revd Justin Welby, and the inaction of, amongst others, the Society for the Study of Theology (SST), alongside the work of Palestinian liberation theologians and anticolonial

theologies, we find substantial theological failure in the UK. Moreover, we argue that this failure, in the form of theological silence, is complicity in the injustices being suffered by the native Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians who have called out to Western theologians to repent and to engage in political activism.

Definitions of public theology are contested, even more so when discriminated against groups are at risk. There are, nevertheless, identifiable markers of ‘public theology’ to be found in the frequently cited works of Martin Marty who coined the term, and David Tracy who speaks of engaging the three publics of academy, church and society, revealing that public theology is, at heart, ‘theology that reaches beyond academia to debate with the wider public on issues of public interest’.¹ Moreover, the legacy of the works of John W. de Gruchy and Beyers Naudé, in particular, have contributed to the significant place of South African anti-apartheid scholarship in contemporary public theological circles.² Discrimination and social injustices, legitimised by White supremacist theology have been scrutinised with a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’,³ leading to the rereading and reinterpretation of biblical narratives and theological traditions from the perspective of the oppressed and in the pursuit of justice. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s work on ‘the cost of discipleship’ is regularly drawn upon by public theologians and ethicists who admire his role in founding

¹ Esther McIntosh, “‘I Met God, She’s Black’: Racial, Gender and Sexual Equalities in Public Theology’, in Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds, *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 298-324 at p. 302. See also Martin E. Marty, ‘Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion’, in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

² See, for example, John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1979) and John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984); see also the Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology, details at <<https://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/bnc/publications>>.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

the Confessing Church, in opposition to government attempts to create a unified Protestant pro-Nazi church in Germany.⁴

Indeed, Bonhoeffer was frequently invoked during Donald Trump's 2017-2021 presidency years in the United States, as theologians noted how, under this regime, the state had abdicated its role as a preserver of life. As Michael P. DeJonge argues, for Bonhoeffer, when the state or the church abdicates this role of guarding life, then the work of Christ in the world is at risk, and thus Christians are called to 'drive a spoke into the wheels' of injustice.⁵ DeJonge finds that, following Trump's appointment, both a protest placard and an article in the New York Times cited variations of the longer quotation: 'We are not to simply bandage wounds of victims beneath the wheel of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself'.⁶ The quotation comes from a 1933 work by Bonhoeffer entitled 'The Church and the Jewish Question' in which he comes to the fore as an early critic of Nazi antisemitism and of the church's entanglement with the state, which is referred to as 'the church struggle' (*Kirchenkampf*). Bonhoeffer's resistance to the Nazis grew out of his deep Christology, a resistance which resulted in his arrest and imprisonment in 1943, before being transferred in 1945 from Tegel Prison to Flossenbürg concentration camp, where, aged 39, he was tried, stripped naked and hanged to death for his part in the plot to kill Hitler.⁷

⁴ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (formerly entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller), DBWE vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003, originally published 1937) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DWBE vol. 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008, unfinished, translated and published posthumously by Eberhard Bethge in 1949).

⁵ Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer on Resistance: The Word Against the Wheel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 3-4.

⁶ DWBE 12:365, as cited by DeJonge, *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE vol. 8 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, originally published posthumously by Eberhard Bethge in 1951).

Raymond Mengus locates Bonhoeffer's theology within the history of Christianity that began as a series of resistance.⁸ Here, he is referring to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth resisted the existing political and religious order and was tried as a political criminal. To echo the liberation theologian Tissa Balasuriya, the context of the Last Supper is that forty-eight hours after Jesus shares this meal with his disciples, he is killed by the forces of Empire.⁹ Thus, to resist an occupying force, to resist death creating structures is the task of the Christian disciple. De Gruchy, reflecting specifically on Palestine, agrees with this reading of Bonhoeffer, pointing to Bonhoeffer's discussion of how the Nazi regime forces us to see history from the point of view of the maltreated and the oppressed.¹⁰ For de Gruchy, those people today are the Palestinians.

With the death toll in Gaza rising exponentially, and with the use of weapons that not only eradicate sentient life but also destroy the local ecology,¹¹ it ought to be incontrovertible to argue that the state of Israel, as well as those nation states that support Israel have abdicated their sacred responsibility. If we are disciples of Christ, then we must take up the cross of resistance to remind these states of their accountability. As Mengus asserts, 'Resistance does not happen unless persons actually resist'.¹² We might expect, therefore, to see widespread public statements and action by theologians and theological ethicists across the globe condemning genocide, especially a genocide that claims

⁸ Raymond Mengus, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Decision to Resist', *Journal of Modern History*, 64 suppl. (December 1992), S134–46.

⁹ Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, ed. Helen Stanton (London: Mowbray, 1997).

¹⁰ John W. De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer's Questions: A Life-Changing Conversation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019).

¹¹ Forensic Architecture, '"No Traces of Life": Israel's Ecocide in Gaza 2023-2024', March 2024, <<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/ecocide-in-gaza>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

¹² Mengus, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Decision to Resist', S134.

theological justification and threatens the lives of Christians (not that the faith of those at risk should matter).

Israel, Palestine and the UK Context

The current onslaught of bombing in the Gaza Strip, by the Israeli armed forces, in which more than 40,000 people (the majority of whom are children) have been killed and more than 94,000 have been injured in the eleven months from 7th October 2023 has been ruled by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in a case against Israel brought by South Africa, to be acts that plausibly constitute genocide.¹³ The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as ‘intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group’ by:

- a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.¹⁴

¹³ OHCHR, ‘Onslaught of Violence Against Women and Children in Gaza Unacceptable: UN Experts’, *United Nations*, 6 May 2024, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/05/onslaught-violence-against-women-and-children-gaza-unacceptable-un-experts>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; International Court of Justice, ‘Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)’, 26 January 2024, <<https://static01.nyt.com/newsgraphics/documenttools/e9d8337ab5ae1d92/72977573-full.pdf>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

¹⁴ General Assembly resolution 260 A (III), ‘Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide’, *United Nations*, 9 December 1948, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

At the same time as the siege of Gaza, the increase in violence, raids and arrests in the occupied West Bank are further markers of the discrimination of the native Palestinian population, via the illegal extension of settler colonialism and a militarily enforced regime deemed to be apartheid by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) and others.¹⁵

According to the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, apartheid - defined as racial segregation and discrimination - is a crime against humanity.¹⁶

Palestine is home to a multi-faith population - including Jews, Christians and Muslims - with holy sites for all three of the Abrahamic faiths located in occupied East Jerusalem. Since we might have expected the global Christian community to express solidarity with them, it is legitimate to take stock of the historical significance of the small Christian community here. Both the place of Jesus' birth and the suspected place of his death are in the occupied West Bank, less than ten kilometres apart: Bethlehem and Jerusalem. International tourists flock to these sites for Christmas and Easter, and yet very few resident Palestinian Christians are granted permits by the Israeli government to travel between them; similarly, only small numbers of Muslims - only men over 55 years of age and women over the age of 50 - living in the occupied West Bank are given permission by Israeli

¹⁵ Amnesty International, 'Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity', 1 February 2022, <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; Human Rights Watch, 'A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution', 27 April 2021, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; B'Tselem, 'A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid', 12 January 2021, <<https://www.btselem.org/apartheid>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

¹⁶ 'International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid', 18 July 1976, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.10_International%20Convention%20on%20the%20Suppression%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Apartheid.pdf> [accessed 25 May 2024].

authorities to pray in the Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem. As the 2023 bombing escalated and Christmas approached, Rev. Dr Munther Isaac, pastor at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, shared images of their nativity scene: a baby wrapped in a keffiyeh on a pile of rubble. More than a month earlier, the ancient Christian community of Gaza had already expressed their fear that the current Israeli onslaught would see them entirely wiped out.¹⁷

In the UK, as with other countries across the globe, we march in our cities and towns week after week demanding a ceasefire; as well as an end to genocide, apartheid and occupation. In short, we assert the right of Palestinians to self-determination.¹⁸ Despite the persistence of the weekly marches, the substantial number of citizens engaging in them, and the spread of student encampments at our universities, it is still but a small fraction of the total population who are publicly calling for a ceasefire and a free Palestine. Similarly, while several faiths are represented at these demonstrations, and the presence of Na'amod, the anti-occupation movement of UK Jews, is vitally important as a visible counter to false accusations of antisemitism, Muslims are clearly the most numerous. There are Christian groups, such as the ecumenical network Sabeel-Kairos, who promote Palestinian liberation theology and the rights of the Palestinian people, but theological voices condemning Israel's bombardment of Gaza and the illegal settlements in the West Bank have been relatively few in number, and slow in coming forward.

¹⁷ Federica Marsi and Ruwaida Amer, 'Gaza's Christians Fear 'Threat of Extinction' Amid Israel War', *AlJazeera*, 10 November 2023, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/10/extinction-gaza-christians-fear-for-communitys-survival-amid-israel-war>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

¹⁸ Whether a two-state solution or one state of secular pluralistic coexistence is the future is yet to be determined, but the former is looking increasingly impossible; see Hani A. Faris, ed., *The Failure of the Two-State Solution: The Prospects of One State in the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2013).

A Failure of Leadership in the Church of England

We can take the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, as an example here, effectively the leading figure in the Church of England and the wider global Anglican Communion, with a seat in the UK Parliament's House of Lords and the ear of the mainstream Press. On 23rd October 2023, he posted on X: 'In Jerusalem yesterday I met with Israeli families whose loved ones were killed or kidnapped in the barbaric terror attacks of 7th October. There are depths of pain and suffering when all we can do as Christians is listen and bear witness'. Followed by, 'I continue to pray for families living through such unimaginable trauma and pain, and I continue to beg for all hostages to be released'.

We do not deny the horror that was inflicted on Jewish and other families when Hamas fighters and other militants breached the barrier between Gaza and southern Israel killing 1,139 people, the majority of whom were civilians, as well as taking 250 hostages. The targeting of civilians is a war crime; it is a violation of international humanitarian law according to the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions which state: 'The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack' (Article 51:2).¹⁹ Nevertheless, given Welby's status as a significant Christian in the UK, his use of language warrants reflection. His first post refers to 'the barbaric terror attacks' without noting that seventy-five years of occupation preceded these attacks. He continues 'all we can do as Christians is listen and bear witness' as if justice and peace are not relevant Christian concepts here. In his second post he adds 'I continue to beg for all hostages to be released', but, we might assume, he is only referring to the Israeli hostages and not the

¹⁹ 'Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol 1), 8 June 1977', Article 51 'Protection of the Civilian Population', *International Humanitarian Law Databases*, <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-51?activeTab=undefined>> [accessed 26 May 2024].

thousands of Palestinians, including children, held and tortured in Israeli prisons under ‘administrative detention’; that is, held without charge.²⁰ Admittedly, there is a limit to how much text can be included in a post on X, but given that this was a thread of two posts, it could have been a thread of more.

It took the Archbishop till November 2023 to call for a ceasefire, and even then he used the phrase ‘humanitarian ceasefire’. This is a phrase that has been criticised by activists, as well as organisations such as Amnesty International, pointing out that this may only indicate a short pause in hostilities, rather than a long-term response.²¹ In January 2024, the Archbishop initially declined to meet with Munther Isaac, citing the latter’s presence at a pro-Palestine rally. It was not until late in July 2024 that the Archbishop used stronger words, urging states to uphold the ICJ ruling. One might argue that it was too little, and too late, the trauma of the Palestinians and the damage to the Gaza Strip will take generations from which to recover.

Israel’s response to the 7th October attacks was swift: declaring war with Hamas, cutting off water and electricity in the Gaza Strip, blocking aid from entering the Strip, and instructing over a million Palestinians in the north of Gaza to evacuate. On the 14th October 2023, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

²⁰ See Amnesty International, ‘Israel/OPT: Horrifying Cases of Torture and Degrading Treatment of Palestinian Detainees Amid Spike in Arbitrary Arrests’, *Amnesty International*, 8 November 2023, <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/israel-opt-horrifying-cases-of-torture-and-degrading-treatment-of-palestinian-detainees-amid-spike-in-arbitrary-arrests/>> [accessed 26 May 2024]; see also Armani Syed, ‘What Palestinian Children Face in Israeli Prisons’, *Time*, 15 December 2023, <<https://time.com/6548068/palestinian-children-israeli-prison-arrested/>> [accessed 26 May 2024].

²¹ See Amnesty International, ‘UK: Shadow Foreign Secretary’s Call for Humanitarian Pause in Gaza is not Practical nor Insufficient’, *Amnesty International*, 13 November 2023, <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-shadow-foreign-secretarys-call-humanitarian-pause-gaza-not-practical-nor>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

(UNRWA) released a statement declaring a water crisis ‘for 2 million people in Gaza’.²²

Deprivation of food, water and medicine for civilians constitutes collective punishment and is prohibited by the Geneva Conventions; Article 33 of Convention 4 states: ‘No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited’.²³ A year earlier, in October 2022, commenting on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, asserted:

Russia’s targeted attacks against civilian infrastructure . . . These are war crimes.

Targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure, with the clear aim to cut off men, women, children from water, electricity and heating with the winter coming – these are acts of pure terror. And we have to call it as such.²⁴

No such comment was forthcoming in respect of Israel’s attacks on Gaza. Similarly, on a visit to Ukraine in November 2022, Archbishop Welby stated: ‘The people of Ukraine have

²² United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East, ‘A Matter of Life and Death: Water Runs Out for 2 Million People in Gaza’, 14 October 2023, <<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/matter-life-and-death-water-runs-out-2-million-people-gaza>> [accessed 26 May 2024].

²³ ‘Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Geneva, 12 August 1949’, Article 33 ‘Individual Responsibility, Collective Penalties, Pillage, Reprisals’, *International Humanitarian Law Databases*, <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-33?activeTab=undefined>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

²⁴ ‘Ursula von der Leyen – 2022 Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the Preparation of the European Council Meeting’, UKPOL.CO.UK, 19 October 2022, <<https://www.ukpol.co.uk/ursula-von-der-leyen-2022-speech-at-the-european-parliament-plenary-on-the-preparation-of-the-european-council-meeting/>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

shown extraordinary courage in the face of Russia's illegal, unjust and brutal invasion' but uttered no such condemnatory words a year later in reference to Israel's siege on Gaza.²⁵

By November 2023 the Gaza Health Ministry (GHM) was already reporting a death toll in Gaza of approximately 7,000 civilians, almost half of them children. Livestreams of the continuing bombardment showed airstrikes targeting hospitals, schools in refugee camps, mosques and churches, cars carrying aid workers and journalists: further violations of international humanitarian law. Article 15 of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions is devoted to the protection of civilian medical and religious personnel in occupied territories, Article 79 focuses on the protection of journalists and Article 53 on the protection of places of worship, while Article 12:1 states that 'Medical units shall be respected and protected at all times and shall not be the object of attack'.²⁶

On the 29th November 2023 sixty-nine Christian church leaders sent a letter to the UK's Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak MP, expressing their opposition to violence, noting the temporary ceasefire that took place between 24th and 30th November, and emphasising the importance of upholding international humanitarian law. Significantly, the church leaders recognise the 'conflict's broader backdrop - ongoing Israeli occupation and the disenfranchisement of Palestinians' and they insist that 'the ground invasion by Israel must end', but they fall short of calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire and an end to occupation; they do not assert the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people;

²⁵ Lambeth Palace, 'Archbishop of Canterbury Begins Visit to Ukraine', *The Archbishop of Canterbury*, 30 November 2022, <<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishop-canterbury-begins-visit-ukraine>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

²⁶ 'Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol 1), 8 June 1977', *International Humanitarian Law Databases*, <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977?activeTab=undefined>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

they do not explicitly condemn Israel's onslaught on Gaza; they do not call on the UK government to stop arms sales to Israel.²⁷

A couple of weeks prior to this letter, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York delivered a joint Presidential address to the Church of England's General Synod. It is here, therefore, where we might expect to find a more detailed and nuanced response from Welby than is to be found in his short posts mentioned above. He again speaks of the 'barbaric slaughter of innocent Israelis by Hamas', and in reference to those taken hostage states: 'No parent should ever lie awake at night wondering whether their child is still alive, whether they are being fed, whether they will hold them again',²⁸ it is still not clear whether this statement is intended to also apply to Palestinian parents with children in Israeli jails. He is, however, unequivocal in his assessment of the effect of the Israeli blockade and onslaught on Gaza, stating 'life has descended into a living hell from which they can't escape' and 'No parent should ever have to write their child's name on their body, so they can be identified if they do not survive the next missile'.²⁹ He laments the serious lack of aid in the Gaza Strip and the rise in violence meted out in the West Bank by settlers in illegal settlements; he asserts that 'the killing of so many civilians, the extensive damage to civilian infrastructure cannot be morally justified'.³⁰ One wonders, therefore, if there is a smaller number of civilian deaths that he thinks can be morally justified. Echoing the words of many

²⁷ Christian Aid, 'Press Release: 'Aid Agencies Join Church Leaders in Letter to UK Prime Minister Calling for an End to Fighting in Gaza'', *Christian Aid*, 29 November 2023, <<https://mediacentre.christianaid.org.uk/aid-agencies-join-church-leaders-in-letter-to-uk-prime-minister-calling-for-an-end-to-fighting-in-gaza/#:~:text=Christian%20Aid%20and%20other%20humanitarian%20agencies%20have%20put,as%20Palestinian%20families%20in%20Gaza%20are%20%20wiped%20out>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

²⁸ Justin Welby, 'Presidential Address to Synod from the Archbishop of Canterbury', *The Church of England*, 13 November 2023, <<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/presidential-address-synod-archbishop-canterbury>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

politicians in the UK and across Europe and the United States of America, he confirms ‘the right and duty of Israel to defend itself’;³¹ this oft repeated statement deserves unpacking (especially since this ‘right to defend’ is rarely afforded to Palestinians).

At the outset, we need to acknowledge, as Welby and other Christian leaders do, the history of the occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel; a history in which Britain has a key role. In 1917 the British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, a committed Christian and member of the Church of England, wrote a letter to British Zionist leader, Lord Rothschild, stating that the British government, already at war with the Ottoman Empire, would ‘favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people’³² (this letter is now known as the Balfour Declaration). In the negotiations that led to this letter, local Palestinians were not consulted, yet as a result of opposition, the following phrase was included: ‘nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’.³³ At the end of the First World War, in 1918, the League of Nations issued the Mandate for the British Administration of Palestine, mandating the enactment of the Balfour Declaration. Decades of conflict between Jews and Palestinian Arabs ensued, until the British government ended the mandate in 1948. On the 15th May 1948, against the backdrop of the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazi persecution and murder of millions of Jews in the Holocaust, the State of Israel was created in an attempt to secure a safe home for Jewish people.

Despite the oft-cited phrase ‘a land without a people for a people without a land’, the land that was to become the State of Israel was already peopled. Over eighty per cent of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War On Palestine* (London: Profile Books, 2020), p. 24.

³³ Ibid.

the native Palestinian population were violently expelled and forced into refugee status in the remaining parts of their own country, Gaza and the West Bank, or into the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon: Zionist forces ethnically cleansing 750,000 Palestinians in the Nakba (catastrophe), at least 15,000 Palestinians were killed and around 400 villages and towns were forcibly depopulated.³⁴ Between 1948 and 1966 the existence of the remaining Palestinians was controlled by the Israeli military, and Palestinian refugees - Nakba survivors - were denied the right of return. Israeli settlements grew and more Palestinian villages were destroyed, not just physically, their names were also removed from maps and books. In 1967, a six-day war between Israel and Arab states saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees displaced further from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in the Naksa (setback).³⁵ Thousands of Palestinian refugees have since been massacred in the Tal al Za'tar, Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon,³⁶ while Israel has remained the occupying power in Gaza and the West Bank.

Since the year 2000, Israel has increased its stranglehold on the movement of Palestinians by building the Israeli-West Bank Barrier, subjecting Palestinians to lengthy and arbitrary inspections at checkpoints, as well as extending illegal settlements and diverting water from Palestinian land to the settlements. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are fenced in on all sides, with no freedom of movement. In the densely populated area, comprised of refugee camps, Gazans are mostly unemployed and heavily reliant on humanitarian aid for daily existence, education and medical treatment; aid can only enter through borders, the opening and closing of which are also strictly controlled by Israel (and Egypt). Hence, we might question whether Israel, as an occupying power, really does have a right to defend

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 72-75.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 96-101.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 128-130.

itself, when that defence amounts to blockading a forcibly displaced refugee population into an open air prison, the Gaza Strip; an area in which 2 million people, if they survive extermination by bombing, are now on the brink of famine and starvation, risking death by disease and infection, or long-term ill-health, disablement via amputations, and extreme trauma.³⁷ On the contrary, international law requires occupying powers to protect the occupied people.³⁸ As a Church of Empire, the Anglican Church like other mainstream churches, must understand and recognise its own responsibility in having set up and continued to support a situation of occupation and colonisation, which, if it genuinely believes in restorative justice, it must act to dismantle. In refusing the voices of Palestinians, the Church has chosen neither to lament its complicity, nor to act against injustice.³⁹

The Lament of Palestinian Christians and the Silence of the Society for the Study of Theology

Early in November 2023, I [author 1] became aware of an open letter ‘from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians’; the letter had been written about two weeks earlier, on 20th October 2023 with the header ‘A Call for Repentance’.⁴⁰ The twelve Palestinian Christian organisations who are signatories to the letter refer to the

³⁷ ‘Northern Gaza in “full blown famine”’, UN Food Agency Chief Says’, *Al Jazeera*, 4 May 2024, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/4/northern-gaza-in-full-blown-famine-un-food-agency-chief-says>>, [accessed 1 June 2024].

³⁸ United Nations, IV Geneva Convention, art, 27-34 and 47-78, 12 August 1949, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf> [accessed 13 September 2024].

³⁹ Since October 2023, Archbishop Welby has called for the release of the Israeli hostages about 17 times, for some form of a ceasefire around 12 times, for the increase of aid in Gaza around 11 times, warned against antisemitism about 8 times and Islamophobia about 4 times, and he has noted the suffering of Palestinian Christians around 5 times. We thank the reviewer for these helpful statistics. Clearly, the Archbishop’s reflections on Islamophobia and the suffering of Palestinians are outweighed multiple times by his reflections on antisemitism and the suffering of Israeli hostages and their families. It seems that the rights of the Palestinian people are not treated equally with those of Israelis or Ukrainians.

⁴⁰ ‘A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians’, *Sabeel Jerusalem*, 20 October 2023, <<https://sabeel.org/a-call-for-repentance-an-open-letter-from-palestinian-christians-to-western-church-leaders-and-theologians/>> [accessed 5 November 2023].

deaths of civilians hit by Israeli airstrikes, including the massacre at Al-Ahli Anglican-Baptist Hospital and the strike on those sheltering in the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza (a church whose history dates back to 425 CE) that killed entire families of Palestinians. In their grief, they write 'we watch with horror the way many western Christians are offering unwavering support to Israel's war against the people of Palestine . . . we write to challenge western theologians and church leaders who have voiced uncritical support for Israel and to call them to repent and change'.⁴¹ Their pain is unambiguous:

we are disturbed by the silence of many church leaders and theologians when it is Palestinian civilians who are killed. We are also horrified by the refusal of some western Christians to condemn the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine, and, in some instances, their justification of and support for the occupation. Further, we are appalled by how some Christians have legitimized Israel's ongoing indiscriminate attacks on Gaza.⁴²

They condemn Zionist theologies that support the occupation of settler-colonial apartheid and the decades of oppression and dehumanisation of the Palestinian people, which, they argue, 'reflects an entrenched colonial discourse that has weaponized the Bible to justify the ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Oceania, and elsewhere, the slavery of Africans and the transatlantic slave trade, and decades of apartheid in South Africa'.⁴³ Further, they assert that Christians using claims of 'self-defence' to justify Israel's bombardment of Gaza and occupation of the West Bank are 'complicit in

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Israel's violence and oppression'.⁴⁴ Drawing on the notion of the Christian God as the God of the oppressed, they 'are deeply troubled by the failure of some western Christian leaders and theologians to acknowledge the biblical tradition of justice and mercy'⁴⁵ for Palestinians. As the letter nears its end, they write:

we say it with a broken heart, we hold western church leaders and theologians who rally behind Israel's wars accountable for their theological and political complicity in the Israeli crimes against the Palestinians, which have been committed over the last 75 years. We call upon them to reexamine their positions and to change their direction, remembering that God 'will judge the world in justice' (Acts 17:31).⁴⁶

It is hard to imagine that any Christian reading such a letter would not be moved to respond, to reassure the Palestinian Christians that they will not use theology to justify the ethnic cleansing and persecution of any people. With this in mind, on 6th November 2023, I [author 1] contacted the Society for the Study Theology (SST) to ask if they would put out an urgent statement regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, a statement that called for politicians and religious leaders to demand an immediate ceasefire. I included a link to the open letter from Palestinian Christians.

The SST is considered to be the leading society for theologians in the UK, with an annual conference attracting speakers from several countries; its first conference was in 1952 at the University of Cambridge. As with other academic societies it is not without its

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

problems, most notably relating to diversity and inclusion. Amongst the list of past Presidents there are many giants of theology, but it was fifty-three years before the first female President was appointed, and it is only now, seventy-two years since its inception, that it has its first Black President.

By 2023 its efforts to diversify its membership had included a 2016 Theology and Race report and, in since 2018, the appointment of an Assistant Secretary to lead on its implementation. In particular, the report argues that the SST ‘must be making space to promote greater reflexivity, conscientization and repentance on the part of its existing members and participants’ because ‘British academic theologians need to engage critically with the role of race in the formation of the discipline in the context of race in the UK and the British Empire’.⁴⁷ I [author 2] was, for a period of two years, the Assistant Secretary for Race and Theology. Amongst the various duties of the secretary, aside from support to members of Global Majority Heritage and UK Minority Ethnic backgrounds, was to assist with and push forward efforts to diversify the conference, diversify membership, and support scholarship that actively queried racism and other violences that stem from power imbalances in the academy. During this time at SST, the Committee even put forward a statement on the diversification of theological worlds, which included the following:

It involves building up a critical mass of participants from marginalised communities, able to shape the substance and methods of the discipline. It also involves the active transformation of exclusive institutional cultures and oppressive discourses (e.g.,

⁴⁷ ‘Report of the SST Executive Committee Subgroup on Theology and Race’, April 2017, revised April 2018, p. 9, available at <<https://www.theologysociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Report-of-the-SST-Executive-Committee-Subgroup-on-Theology-and-Race.pdf>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

those of hegemonic whiteness). Such work is necessary for the development of a healthier, more inclusive discipline.⁴⁸

Given these developments and the connections between the British Empire and decades of occupation of Palestine, I [author 1] hoped that the SST would be swift in responding to the open letter from Palestinian Christians and unequivocal in critiquing the use of Zionist theologies to continue apartheid in the West Bank and bombardment in Gaza. Reassuringly, I did indeed receive a swift response on 7th November from the then President thanking me for the prompt and expressing concern regarding the bombing of Gaza. Moreover, the then President affirmed that, because the open letter from Palestinian Christians appeals specifically to theologians, it was appropriate for the SST Committee to give serious consideration to a response. It was there that the trail went cold; no response was forthcoming.

Fortuitously, during a meeting at the beginning of February I found a further opportunity to ask the SST if they had reached a decision regarding responding to the open letter from Palestinian Christians; it transpired that they had decided not to respond on the grounds that they did not think they could reach a statement on which all members would agree. Members – theologians who often use the terms ‘decolonisation’ and ‘social justice’ – would not agree to call for a ceasefire, even after the ICJ’s January ruling that Israel’s actions were plausibly genocidal. Dismayed, a few of us who do believe theologies of justice require action consulted Jewish and Muslim colleagues, as well as Palestinian academics, and wrote

⁴⁸ Executive Committee, ‘Statement: The Task of Enabling Inclusive Theological Discourse’, *Society for the Study of Theology*, 25 January 2022, <<https://www.theologysociety.org.uk/initiatives/theology-and-race/statement-the-task-of-enabling-inclusive-theological-discourse/#:~:text=It%20involves%20building%20up%20a%20critical%20mass%20of,and%20oppressive%20discourses%20%28e.g.%2C%20those%20of%20hegemonic%20whiteness%29>> [accessed 8 June 2024].

an open letter to the SST.⁴⁹ While the letter circulated amongst theological and related networks collecting signatures and responses, several theologians informed us that they agreed with the letter, but they could not or would not sign. Nevertheless, signatories included a previous President of the SST, as well as some current Committee members, those ordained in the Church of England and other denominations, academic theologians from a range of countries, and those connected with Christian or other religious organisations and charities. On 21st February 2024 we sent the letter to the SST highlighting the inadequacy, thus far, of their response to the ongoing bombardment and rapidly rising death toll and injury of innocent Palestinian men, women and children (including the destruction of universities in Gaza) and asking that they respond by 21st March. We noted in the letter that the stated purpose of the SST in Article 2 of its Constitution is 'to foster theological integrity, responsibility and vocation in academy, church and other areas of public life'.⁵⁰

On the 8th March we received notification that, since the annual SST conference is held in April, a proposed response to our letter would be tabled at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) with the opportunity for discussion. On 26th March their proposed response was circulated along with our open letter in which:

- 1) We call on the SST to set up a hardship fund for the purpose of funding/waiving conference fees for Palestinian academics (potentially funded by asking members who can afford to do so to contribute).
- 2) We call on the SST to divest from institutions that sustain Israeli apartheid and to encourage its members to similarly investigate the financial complicity of their

⁴⁹ The letter remains open for signatures via sharing the link, it has not been published to the web as yet. We await their final response before deciding whether to publish the letter. At present, it can be found at <<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yCEOBdA9QE84V1it0mRnA-pa5zuWKC4F/edit>>.

⁵⁰ 'Constitution - 2. Objects and Purposes', *Society for the Study of Theology*, 12th May 2020, <<https://www.theologysociety.org.uk/about-us/constitution/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

employers and to end relationships with 'Israeli academic institutions, all of which are complicit in Israel's occupation, colonisation and system of apartheid' ('the boycott is of institutions not of individuals' who do critical anti-occupation and peace-building work [BRICUP](#)).

- 3) We call on the SST to form coalitions or partnerships with other indigenous organisations to encourage churches and Christian organisations to investigate the claim of apartheid, as mandated by the [World Council of Churches](#).
- 4) We call on the SST to amplify the voices and work of Palestinian theologians and to critically challenge political Zionism, Christian Zionism and liberal theologies that justify Israeli apartheid and settler colonialism.

We end the letter with this: 'We hope that you will enact a theology of justice by heeding these actions. Silence in the face of injustice is complicity in that injustice'.

In their response to number one, they 'propose setting up an additional bursary fund to enable us to waive or discount conference fees for Palestinian academics and others affected by military conflict'. While we welcome the commitment to a bursary fund, the allusion to 'others affected by military conflict' waters down the response in respect of the particular suffering of Palestinians and the *educide*/*'scholasticide'*⁵¹ in Gaza. In response to number two, they suggest committing 'to investigating . . . current banking arrangements' but do not commit to investigating their spend; the conference venue is a university that has financial ties with companies producing arms used by Israel. In response to number three, they 'judge that such an investigation would be beyond the objects and purposes of the Society', which is to slightly misunderstand the ask above and evades responsibility. In response to number four they state that they 'will hold an event that focuses on their

⁵¹ A term coined in 2009 by Palestinian academic Karma Nabulsi to mean the 'systematic destruction of Palestinian education by Israel'; see Ameera Ahmad and Ed Vulliamy, 'In Gaza, the Schools are Dying Too', *The Guardian*, 10 January 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/10/gaza-schools>> [accessed 13 September 2009].

[Palestinian theologians] work within the next six months and we wait to see what transpires in this respect. They conclude their response with this statement:

The open letter ends with the statement that ‘Silence in the face of injustice is complicity in that injustice’. We are sympathetic to the sentiment of this statement in mobilising voices to challenge injustice, but we do not think it is fair in relation to the position of the Society. In making this response, we are very conscious of the multitude of injustices globally that the Society has not addressed or been asked to address in a similar way. That does not make SST complicit in them.

This last paragraph is defensive rather than proactive and seems to completely miss the point that Palestinian Christians have specifically asked for Western theologians and church leaders to respond, and, in addition, the oppression of Palestinians is bolstered by Zionist theologies that warrant critique.

At the AGM only three or four people spoke in support of the open letter, several members claimed the letter was one-sided, and requested that we ‘hear from both sides’; yet, requesting to hear from perpetrators of genocide seems like a morally bankrupt ask.⁵² Other members claimed (and posted during the AGM on X) that the open letter denied the right of Israel to exist, and that Jews would not be able to sign it. The former claim lacks evidence given that there is nothing in the letter that could be interpreted as denying Israel the right to exist, and the latter claim is absurd, at best, given that several of the signatories are in fact Jewish, and it is antisemitic, at worst, implying that all Jews support the

⁵² Coincidentally, this conference was taking place at the same time as the thirty-year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and it is doubtful that anyone in the room would have suggested that there is a suitable defence justifying that genocide.

bombardment of Gaza. The majority of members did not speak at all and were simply silent. We find such silence theologically and morally problematic in the face of livestreamed war crimes, not to mention the special problem of Christian Zionism and its relation to political Zionism. After failing to reach agreement on a response to the open letter in the AGM, the SST Committee promised to engage in further reflection; the official SST account on X posted a tweet with the hashtag #AgreeToDisagree, and several members congratulated the Society on its ability to be a space where all opinions hold equal value. Under certain circumstances, reasoned disagreement may, indeed, be a positive outcome; however, when international humanitarian law is being persistently violated, we do not think that holding a space for opinions that lead to a refusal to condemn those violations is something to be celebrated.

Several months after the AGM, in September 2024 the Society is organising a panel event on public theology and ‘the war in Gaza and Israel’. While this is a welcome development, the title is somewhat confused; organisers still shy away from using the word genocide, and, crucially, insist on the focus on Gaza, rather than referring to Palestine and thus recognising that the root of the issue is a long-term, imperial occupation.

World Christianity, Liberation and Anticolonial Theologies

Eleven months into the siege on Gaza and, what some activists and organisations are calling, ‘the silent genocide in the West Bank’,⁵³ Munther Issac’s Christmas baby in the rubble has been followed by a cross in the rubble at Easter. The unfathomable level of the killing and starvation of Palestinians has been allowed to continue unabated with limited

⁵³ See, for example, Sabeel-Kairos webinar with Rifat Kassis, 5 September 2024, <<https://www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk/webinar-the-silent-genocide/>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

condemnation from academic institutions and international governments: America, Germany and the UK are still supplying Israel with arms and universities are still investing in their manufacture.⁵⁴ Several countries and universities are actively policing peaceful protests and student encampments; some politicians and media reports imply that peaceful demonstrations are dangerous and hate-filled, in stark contrast to the actual destructive violence that the protesters are protesting against and that those same politicians continue to support.⁵⁵

Munther Isaac has repeatedly called on churches to grasp their Christian duty to act; he insists that prayers for peace are insufficient.⁵⁶ Liberal Christians need to shake off the approach to theology that aims to avoid upsetting anyone: war criminals need to be held to account whether they like it or not and destructive theologies need to be debunked in pursuit of justice. Academics, including theologians, in the UK need to stop using fear as an excuse for silence: being afraid of criticism or of damaging career progression pales in comparison with the risk to life for Palestinians in the West Bank and death and starvation in the Gaza Strip. There are many subjects on which we might legitimately disagree, but blatant injustice is not one of them. If genocide is not a red line, then it is difficult to imagine what is. In years to come when children and grandchildren ask their elders 'what did you do

⁵⁴ See Okopi Ajonye, *Weaponising Universities: Research Collaborations between UK Universities and the Military Industrial Complex* (CAAT and Demilitarise Education), February 2024, <<https://caat.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/02/CAAT-Weaponising-Universities-WEB-1.pdf>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

⁵⁵ Sky News, "These are Hate Marches": Home Secretary Hits Out at Pro-Palestinian Protests as UK Terror Threat Level Remains 'Substantial', *SkyNews*, 30 October 2023, <<https://news.sky.com/story/these-are-hate-marches-home-secretary-hits-out-at-pro-palestinian-protests-as-uk-terror-threat-level-remains-substantial-12996645>> [accessed 1 June 2024]; Cathrin Schaer, 'German Police Crack Down on Pro-Palestine Rallies, Raising Alarm', *Al Jazeera*, 10 November 2023, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/10/germany-gaza-protests-crackdown>> [accessed 1 June 2024]; Anna Oakes and Claudia Gohn, 'Inside the Columbia University Student Encampment — and the Crackdown', *Rolling Stone*, 1 May 2024, <<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/columbia-university-inside-student-encampment-protest-crackdown-1235013724/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

⁵⁶ Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, 'Christ Under the Rubble - A Vigil for Gaza, with The Revd Dr Munther Isaac', *YouTube*, 18 February 2024 <<https://youtu.be/YKDK2UT63iU>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

during genocide?’ numerous theologians will have failed, some through outright support of Israel’s action against the Palestinians, but many more through silence.

John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer explain that ‘While the Nakba sowed the seeds for Palestinian theologians to nurture a theology of liberation, it was not until the Naksa (‘setback’) in 1967 that PLT [Palestinian Liberation Theology] emerged with a new sense of urgency’.⁵⁷ This urgency was driven by the expansion of the religious justification of Zionist ideology. A rise in Christian Zionism, which they define as: ‘a theology arguing that the establishment of the State of Israel was a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and [that] the Jewish people possess a distinct covenant with God based on their ethnicity’,⁵⁸ was understandably deeply disturbing for Palestinian Christians; it threatened their existence as Palestinians and as Christians. Thus, ‘Palestinian Christians, both clergy and laity . . . cried out for justice and freedom’.⁵⁹ This cry is uncompromisingly formalised and asserted in the 2009 Kairos Document and its assertion in Article 2.5 that ‘the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights’, and, further, ‘any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian’.⁶⁰ As the Greek term ‘*kairos*’ implies, now is the critical moment, the time to act.

Yet, the occupation continues, as does European and American support for it in many Christian circles. The connection between the Palestinian Kairos Document and the earlier 1985 Kairos Document of South Africa is deliberate.⁶¹ It is not only in Palestine that

⁵⁷ John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer, ‘Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices’, *Studies in World Christianity*, 28.3 (2022), 287–310 at 290.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ ‘Kairos Palestine Document’, *World Council of Churches*, 11 December 2009, <<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/kairos-palestine-document>> [accessed 8 June 2024].

⁶¹ See Jerry Pillay, ‘Apartheid in the Holy Land: Theological Reflections on the Israel and/or Palestine Situation from a South African Perspective’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72:4 (2016), 1-9 at 6.

the Bible has been interpreted in such a way as to justify racial segregation; consequently, Palestinian Christians are not the only oppressed Christians to find themselves arguing for the equality of the oppressed via a different hermeneutic of the biblical text than that of their oppressors. For Black South Africans, it was White colonisers who distorted the message of Christianity to serve their own ends, to suppress and to exploit, to maintain power under the guise of divine ordination.

The Whiteness of Christian theology has been under increased scrutiny in recent years from the 2016 hashtag #WhiteChurchQuiet to the publications of Willie Jennings and Anthony Reddie, amongst others, including indefatigable womanist theologians, such as Emilie M. Townes, Wil Gafney and Katie Geneva Cannon, who highlight the use of racialised and sexist theology to oppress Black women especially.⁶² While their critique draws on the luminary of Black theology, James Cone, the need for an ongoing interrogation of a persistent theological colonial legacy reveals how far we have yet to come. Indeed, thinking of the persistence of colonial legacies is vital here because it helps us to understand that Whiteness is not only about a specific community; it is about naming the logics that maintain situations of occupation and extraction. In his dialogue with Third World Theology (now sometimes referred to as majority world or two-thirds world),⁶³ Cone argues for greater solidarity between such theologies. He exemplifies the need for work that struggles for the whole of humanity, that recognises how the logics of colonialism and capital

⁶² See, for example, Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2020); Anthony G. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (London: Routledge, 2021); Emilie M. Townes, ed., *Walking Through the Valley: Womanist Explorations in the Spirit of Katie Geneva Cannon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022).

⁶³ In the 1970s and 1980s, Third World Theology was a political project of Asia, Africa and Latin America that sought to be an epistemological break from the minority world. Neoliberal dis-ease with the use of 'First World' and 'Third World', given the history of White supremacy and Western imperialism, led to a preference, in the minority world for terms such as 'global South, majority world and two-thirds world'. However, the origin and purpose of Third World Theology is that of southern activists and thinkers who dreamt of a different epistemological and moral approach to the world that is propositional and resistive.

underdeveloped 'Black America and Africa, as well as Latin America and Asia'.⁶⁴ Our struggles to dismantle empire are conjoined struggles, and Cone, especially, offers us a vision of anti-racism and liberation that is planetary; it is not just reserved for distinct individuals or communities. Liberation theology, whatever its context - Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Oceania or EuroAmerica - does not stand with institutions. Rather, it roots itself with the poor, not only as a point of analysis, but as the bearers of authoritative knowledge about a particular situation; in short, this is where theology can and must come from. Here, we can identify the poor as any community, entity or area that is serially brutalised, and systematically denied justice, with whom, liberation theology must be, Kelly Brown Douglas holds, in 'uncompromising solidarity'.⁶⁵

Hence, liberation theology, like many other liberationist impulses, demands the reordering of power, seeing and exposing the links between colonial logics, racism and the accumulation of wealth through capital and/or neoliberal economics. Liberation theology sees empire and occupation as death creating, and so it centres the resistance and anger of those to whom life is denied. As the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) states, this is not 'a passive cry of resignation to the realities of death. It is a strident witness to the persistence of life. The cry for life is not a cry of despair, sorrow, hopelessness or grief. It is a cry that denies victory to torture, detainment, starvation and military might'.⁶⁶ From the list of injustices in that statement alone, we are reminded of the sophistication of Cone's argument regarding what liberation was, is and must be; namely, a

⁶⁴ Matthew M. Harris and Tyler B. Davis, 'In the Hope that They Can Make their Own Future': James H. Cone and the Third World', *Journal of Africana Religions*, 7:2 (2019), 189–212 at 199.

⁶⁵ Douglas used this phrase as a keynote speaker at the 2023 SST annual conference; just a year on from that conference, the SST seems to have forgotten this clarion call.

⁶⁶ Ecumenical Association of Third World (EATWOT), 'The Cry for Life: The Spirituality of the Third World (Statement)', *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa*, 1 (1993), 45–71 at 47.

total and collective struggle. Collectivity and struggle are underlined in the various mobilisations of Afro-Asian solidarity, internationalist feminist campaigns, and the Pan-African initiatives that marked the historical period in which liberation theologies were articulating themselves initially. We are not meant to be disconnected from, or blind to the struggles and resistance movements of the systematically brutalised; this is a collective struggle for a full humanity, as the Indonesian theologian Marianne Katoppo might put it.⁶⁷

In this time and in this moment, it is, arguably, sinful, that theologians are not only refusing to hear but are complicit in the silencing of their Palestinian colleagues, especially in the case of Palestinian liberation theologians who have explicitly requested the solidarity of theologians and church leaders. As we have discussed above, the need for a constant interrogation of the imperialistic tendencies of theology is being voiced emphatically by Palestinian liberation theologians. Palestinian liberation theology is, first and foremost, an indigenous theological response to occupation; it locates itself within the deep consciousness of the Palestinians as a colonised people who have, for decades, been part of a people's movement of popular resistance against settler colonialism and occupation.⁶⁸ Much of their work challenges the violence of Zionist biblical interpretations and the logics of colonial Western Christianity; in addition, as Nicole Patierno explains, it positions Christian thinking as part of a collective struggle for liberation alongside Muslim counterparts.⁶⁹ Palestinian liberation theologians specifically call out Christian Zionism as the theology of empire: a theology that views Palestinians as a hindrance to the aims and

⁶⁷ Marianne Katoppo, 'Veni Pater Pauperum: Some Notes on the Liberation of Theology', *Vidyajyoti*, 10:49 (1985), 519–23.

⁶⁸ Atalia Omer, 'The Cry of the Forgotten Stones: The Promise and Limits of a Palestinian Liberation Theology as a Method for Peacebuilding', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 43:2 (2015), 369–407.

⁶⁹ Nicole Patierno, 'Palestinian Liberation Theology: Creative Resistance to Occupation', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 26:4 (2015), 443–64.

desires of empire.⁷⁰ Hatem Bazian, for example, describes in depth the ways in which the scriptural texts have been manipulated in order to create a narrative that justifies the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population; that is, they ‘clothe human projects in divine purpose’.⁷¹ In that same vein, Munther Isaac asserts in one of his sermons: ‘Here in Palestine . . . the Bible is weaponized against us, our very own sacred text. In our terminology in Palestine, we speak of the Empire. Here we confront the theology of the Empire - a disguise for superiority, supremacy, “chosenness” and entitlement’.⁷²

The demand of Palestinian theologians is clear, and it forces us to ask, why theologians in the UK and elsewhere, even those who profess themselves committed to an ethos of anti-racism, refuse to listen. Can it be that certain forms of response, such as simply adding more faces of colour or including more diverse texts is as far as they are willing to go? Has decolonisation been subsumed in diversification and considered complete? If so, such theologians are purposively ignoring the essential argument of liberationist thinking: the face of the Divine is not to be seen in the logics of empire.

Conclusion

Liberation is the most crucial task of theology. Theologies, particularly theologies that are oriented towards liberationist purposes, aim to critique the material reality in which the

⁷⁰ See Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017) and Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023).

⁷¹ Hatem Bazian, ‘The Indigenous Palestinians: Twice Dispossessed by the Biblical Text’, *Harvard International Review*, 35:3 (2014), 40–43 at 41.

⁷² As cited by Hamid Dabashi, ‘War on Gaza Pits Palestinian Liberation Theology against Evangelical Zionism’, *Middle East Eye*, 5 February 2024, <<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/war-gaza-palestinian-liberation-theology-zionism-evangelical#:~:text=In%20our%20terminology%20in%20Palestine,against%20Evangelical%20and%20Jewish%20Zionism>> [accessed 8 June 2024].

logic of capital prevails, and to be completely oriented towards liberation in a historical praxis. As Cone writes: 'wherever people are being dehumanized, divine righteousness is disclosed in that historical struggle to be other than what is intended by their oppressors'.⁷³ The repeated bombing of Gaza has caused an outpouring of popular resistance, of various forms, including interfaith resistance. Much of this has not come from theological societies or learned religious societies, causing a group of Palestinian Christian theologians to lament:

the western theologians and church leaders who have voiced uncritical support for Israel and to call them to repent and change. Sadly, the actions and double standards of some Christian leaders have gravely hurt their Christian witness and have severely distorted their moral judgment with regards to the situation in our land.⁷⁴

Theology is occurring in both explicit and implicit ways in Palestine, and yet, with a few exceptions, it does not necessarily touch the theological work of the Western academy. Theologians, even postcolonial theologians, unless directly affected, appear to be largely silent, as we have shown above with the examples of the Church of England's senior bishop and the UK's Society for the Study of Theology.

It is arguable that our postcolonial theologies and World Christianity studies have lost something of the radicalism and organising hunger of internationalism such that theologians appear discomforted by global collective action. Despite expressing admiration

⁷³ James H. Cone, 'Lecture: The Relationship of the Christian Faith to Political Praxis', Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey, 12 March 1980,

<<https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/jcone.html>> [accessed 8 June 2024].

⁷⁴ 'A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians', Sabeel Jerusalem, 20 October 2023, <<https://sabeel.org/a-call-for-repentance-an-open-letter-from-palestinian-christians-to-western-church-leaders-and-theologians/>> [accessed 5 November 2023].

for Bonhoeffer and his Christian resistance, it is relatively rare to find a fellow theologian at a protest march, at a vigil outside a detention centre, or organising a teach-in at a university. There is a desperate sadness to the fact that, unless directly affected by an issue, theologians, even purportedly liberationist theologians, public theologians and ethicists, do not feel compelled to theologize with their feet and their voices. Those who are removed from sites of struggle are also no longer engaged in knowledge that comes from social organising and community dialogue, that is, knowledge that comes 'from below'.

A commonly cited quotation attributed to Bonhoeffer reads: 'Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act'.⁷⁵ More explicitly, Robert K. Hudnut adds: 'To say nothing when a country is burning is to say something. It is to let the country burn'.⁷⁶ Gaza is burning, the West Bank is burning, Palestine is burning. We cannot be intellectuals who turn away from difficult positions, we must be vulnerable, and willing to challenge empire. After all, Christianity is rooted in the lives and example of Jesus and Mary, Palestinian Jews who looked empire in the face and asserted the power of the Divine over it. As theologians, our only task is to seek God, to seek the Divine. Where is God now? God, as Munther Isaac asserts, is under the rubble of bombed schools, universities, hospitals, churches and mosques. To liberate God, we must

⁷⁵ The quotation does not appear in Bonhoeffer's writings despite the common attribution, it is, nonetheless, an apt summation of the ethical imperative in his work. Warren Throckmorton and others have traced the essence of the quotation to Robert K. Hudnut, *A Sensitive Man and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 21, see Warren Throckmorton, 'Update on a Spurious Bonhoeffer Quote: Not to Speak is to Speak, Not to Act is to Act', 11 November 2016, <<https://wthrockmorton.com>> [accessed 13 September 2024].

⁷⁶ Hudnut is reflecting on the racism in American churches' silence on the Vietnam war and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. He continues: 'The time is now. The place is here' and then cites the famous Martin Niemöller quotation: 'In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me – and by that time there was no one left to speak up' (ibid.).

be able to be vulnerable and willing to embrace the overtly political. We must not be silent:
silence in the face of injustice *is* complicity in that injustice.