

The Palestinian struggle, South Africans and Jewish Israelis: Crosslines between solidarity, faith, spirituality and agnosticism

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Abstract

What role does religion play (or not play) in transnational activism in the context of prolonged violence? The narrow strip of land known as Palestine and Israel has special significance to three of the world's largest faith traditions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The motivations of 21 South African and Jewish Israeli activists in support of the Palestinian struggle offer an inductive, contextual perspective on the interplay between differences in religiosity and shared aims and values in this context. These respondents to a case study in empirical ethics hold tensions of difference and yet navigate between religious and other existential orientations in their praxis of solidarity with the marginalised. The article discusses how and why the activists, despite their different convictions, share similar views of the positive and negative roles played by religion in the Palestinian struggle.

Keywords

Palestine; Israel; religion; activism; integrity; Zionism

1. Introduction

The geographical site known as Israel and Palestine has special significance to three of the world's largest religious traditions – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Bahá'í faith, which emphasizes the spiritual unity of all humanity, also has its main office in Israel. Minority religious traditions in the area include the Druze, the Samaritans or Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Karaites.¹ Yet only Jews have full civil, human and religious rights in

1 “Diplomacy in Action. Israel and the occupied territories,” International religious freedom report: 1, US Department of State, 2012. [Online]. Available: <http://www.state.gov>.

Israel and in Palestine. In viewing the asymmetric reality through the lens of Jerusalem, Palestinian Christians remark that the city has become one “of discrimination and exclusion, a source of struggle rather than peace”.² Jewish American Mark Braverman adds that it “is uncanny and tragic that in the current discourse, the roles of the combatants are turned upside down: the Jews are portrayed as the victims, and the Palestinians as the aggressors”.³

Israel scored a rating of zero on the Freedom of Religion Index by the Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Dataset in consecutive investigations until the last CIRI report in 2011. This rate indicates severe and widespread governmental restrictions on religious freedom.⁴ In 2018 Israel deepened its discrimination on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds. The country’s new Basic Law on the nature of the nation-state has constitutional status. Without specifying where the borders are, it specifies that the “Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established” to realise the Jewish People’s “natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination”.⁵ This right to national self-determination is deemed exclusive to Jews and the law wants to preserve also the cultural, historical and religious heritage of the world’s Jewry. The claim of exclusive Jewish ownership to a “Promised Land” which purportedly includes the current Israel and Palestine is widely supported by people who conflate the biblical Israel with the modern state.⁶

gov/documents/organization/208604.pdf [Accessed: 6 June 2020].

- 2 Kairos Palestine, *A moment of truth. A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*, (Jerusalem, 2009), 6.
- 3 Mark Braverman, *Fatal embrace. Christians, Jews, and the search for peace in the Holy Land* (Austin, TX: Synergy 2010), 24.
- 4 Suraya Dadoo & Firoz Osman, *Why Israel? The anatomy of Zionist apartheid – A South African perspective* (Johannesburg, Porcupine: 2013), 222–223.
- 5 “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People,” The Knesset. [Online]. Available: <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf> [Accessed: 27 May 2020].
- 6 Izak Spangenberg and Christi van der Westhuizen, “Critical reflections on Israel’s claim to land in Palestine,” *LitNet Akademies*, 15 no. 3 (2018):95. [Online]. Available: https://www.litnet.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/LitNet_Akademies_15-3_Spangenberg-VdWesthuizen_95-137.pdf

Zionism is a product of Europe's persecution of Jews that supports the transformation of the transnational and extraterritorial Jewish identity into a national identity to establish military, socio-economic and geopolitical control over all of Palestine as it existed before the unilateral declaration of the Israeli state in 1948.⁷ Yet a critical analysis of the history of occupation and of biblical land promises by Spangenberg and Van der Westhuizen shows that Israelites, Jews and Israelis occupied the current Israel and Palestine for almost 500 years, while Christian and Muslim groups occupied it for over 1 400 years. These authors conclude that Zionist land claims for religious and historical reasons are ungrounded and mask Israel's neo-colonial advancement of "Western white geopolitical control over the Middle East".⁸ The Zionist narrative of "Jewish occupation of the Palestinian territory as stretching back to biblical times" is used to promote a contemporary national identity, but in "reality, this ancient history is fabricated and the identity – the Israeli – is completely new, having been produced through the recent occupation of Palestine".⁹

For the Palestinians – whether in Israel, in occupied Palestine or in the diaspora – the *Nakba or catastrophe of losing land, lives, livelihoods and human rights continue relentlessly*.¹⁰ When I monitored human rights violations in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel in 2011, I met several Jewish Israelis who campaign for Palestinian rights. Back home my path crossed with South Africans who do the same. These citizens persistently and often in the face of great social resistance and at considerable personal cost, take a public

7 The global Zionist movement started as a secular political organization in 1897 under Theodor Herzl. Most European Jews who settled in Historical Palestine at the dawn of the twentieth century were secular. The religious minority had little desire to change the political, economic and social structures, but the secular majority desired concrete changes in their material and political circumstances. (Marc Ellis, *Future of the prophetic: Israel's ancient wisdom re-presented* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 28–30, 35–40.).

8 Spangenberg and Van der Westhuizen, "Critical reflections," 98.

9 Spangenberg and Van der Westhuizen, "Critical reflections," 97.

10 According to Human Rights Watch, Israel continues "to enforce severe and discriminatory restrictions on Palestinians' human rights; restrict the movement of people and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip; and facilitate the transfer of Israeli citizens to settlements in the occupied West Bank, an illegal practice under international humanitarian law" ("Israel and Palestine: Events of 2019," World Report 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/israel/palestine>

stand to influence perceptions, policies and practices. The absence of any scientific research on activists from South Africa, the limited research on why Jewish Israelis advocate for Palestinian rights and my own questions on what motivates advocacy, inspired a case study with 21 respondents. This article focuses on whether or not religion motivates their activism. It starts with an overview of the research approach and the activists' demographical details. The role of religion is henceforth presented through four lenses: inclusivity and exclusivity, values, intersectionality and worthwhileness. The conclusion highlights the relevance of the findings for theology.

2. A case study in empirical ethics: research design and agenda

2.1 Study field and aims

The interdisciplinary study is located in the field of empirical ethics, which falls into the group of disciplines dealing with fields such as systematic theology, ethics and public theology, rather than, for example, into the discipline of philosophical ethics. The exploratory nature of the research, which acknowledges that one does not know what one does not know, called for a receptive open-mindedness in service of the respondents' views as told from their perspectives. Therefore, the investigation was informed by the research question, rather than by pre-existing or pre-determined theories or hypotheses. It was neither restricted to the three Abrahamic or any other religious traditions, nor interested only in the views of those who believe in God. The focus was on why people – whether they are adherents of particular religious traditions, or whether they are spiritual, or agnostic – are activists in the Palestinian struggle. The aim was to investigate the is relations (nonnormative) of the respondents' self-perceived ethics and not what ought to be or what should be, or to evaluate particular theological interpretations. The in-depth personal interviews were guided by a general paradigm of inquiry and the analysis was qualitative, inductive and thematic. The interpretation was a systematic, continuous, recursive, non-linear process of asking questions and of comparing information that created a network of interrelated links in a hermeneutic platform from which I filtered and grouped overlaps, silences and differences. The research results were presented in the form of grounded statements.

While empirical ethics may challenge existing assumptions or add nuances to understandings, it remains necessary to test empirical findings against normative judgements.¹¹ The study's problem statement provided a normative framework for the empirical work and triangulation was used to evaluate the validity and the reliability of qualitative findings. Since a researcher already takes a normative position when a problem is identified and described, I strived for critical reflexivity between the theoretical positioning of the study and my role as researcher by clarifying from the start that the research decisions were not neutral or non-judgmental and that appeals for balance, neutrality, objectivity, or an equal compromise can be deeply problematic in the contexts of discrimination and injustice.¹² "Do "objectivity," "moderation," and "both sides" not have contexts? Is "moderation in matters of manifest injustice" really a virtue?" ask Muslim Voices for Peace, for example, because talking "about the 'Jewish-German conflict' or the 'black-white situation' or 'marital problems' in the face of the Holocaust, apartheid or of domestic abuse is no great virtue; it is the path of acquiescence and, ultimately, complicity".¹³ At the same time a rigid framework of being either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel perpetuates othering and exclusion.¹⁴ The study was not biased towards siding with a people, but it was concerned with the contributions of those who favour inclusive human rights. The aim was not to understand the motivations of those who want to advance exclusivist, polarised, or fundamentalist positions, but to investigate the views of those who advocate for just, peaceful co-habitation through non-violent means, and who respect international law in the Palestinian campaign for a just peace and self-determination.

11 John M. Doris and Stephen P. Stich. "As a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (Oxford University Press, 2007), 116.

12 C. Leget, and P. Borry. "Empirical ethics: The case of dignity in end-of-life decisions," *Ethical Perspectives* 17, no. 2 (2010): 231–262. Anne de Jong, "The Gaza Freedom Flotilla: Human rights, activism and academic neutrality," *Social Movement Studies* 11 no. 2 (2012):193–209.

13 Farid Esack, "An Islamic response to Kairos Palestine," in *Kairos for Global Justice*, ed. Robin Meyers (Bethlehem: Ideas Graphic Design and Printing Services, 2012), 80–85.

14 Judith Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 122–125.

2.2. Demographical details of the respondents

The individuals from the two countries were grouped into one case study to allow for contextual differences which made it possible to observe similar and/or diverse properties.¹⁵ The 21 anonymous respondents were a mix of personal contacts, people who were introduced through mutual contacts and people to whom I wrote without any prior introduction.¹⁶ Their experiences as activists in the Palestinian struggle ranged between 18 months and over 30 years. Nearly two thirds had been involved for ten years or more and almost a quarter for over 30 years. The qualifying age of 20 created space for conscientious objectors. Gender, age, country/countries of residence, nationalities and religious orientations were noted at the start of each interview, but they were neither stratification criteria nor determining factors in locating the type of case study, or the unit of analysis. Thus, I did not assume *a priori* that specific religious tradition(s) play a greater role in activism over and above other orientations.¹⁷ Other than making sure that the candidates met the minimum age and that there were an equal number of citizens from both countries, I did not ask about gender, age, possible other nationalities and religious orientations before the start of each interview, but deliberately allowed for plurality.¹⁸

It follows that the selection criteria for South Africans and Jewish Israelis were the same, with the exception of citizenship. The citizenship criterion implied, *ipso facto*, that a cultural and/or religious affiliation to Jewishness was an additional criterion for the Israeli respondents: whereas the South African Constitution does not discriminate between religious orientations, only Jewish Israeli citizens enjoy the full benefits of the Israeli state. In the end the respondents were from different cultural orientations, generations, professions, genders and a variety of religious orientations such as being Christian, Muslim, Jewish, spiritual, humanist, agnostic, post-

15 Nick Emmel, *Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research: A realist approach* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 16.

16 The study was a high-risk undertaking and it obtained institutional ethical clearance (HS1073/2014).

17 The term “religious tradition” includes traditions that do not assume the presence of a God, and/or those that focus on behaviour patterns rather than on faith.

18 R21 had citizenship of both countries.

paradigmatic, pagan and atheist. One Jewish person who described herself as spiritual embraced also Buddhism.

Only a third – four Muslims, two Christians and one Jew – identified as people of faith. All the Jewish Israelis and two of the three South African Jews identified as being both Jewish and “secular”, “atheist”, “pagan” or “spiritual”. For example:

I: When I asked about your religious orientation, you added that you're also Jewish. But your nationality is not Jewish.

R7: No.

I: It's also not your religious tradition.

R7: No.

I: What is it?

R7: It's a historical experience that I suppose very intensely moulded my, and a whole lot of people's, personalities in South Africa when we grew up. A large, large part of it is being survivors. [...] It's also got a much lighter side around the sort of cultural civil, stuff around food, jokes. I suppose the synagogue certainly is the centre of a community. So, I think it's like a community within being a South African citizen.¹⁹

It became clear that being Jewish does not necessarily imply an association with Judaism and denotes also historical, cultural and/or civil associations. One South African who did not dissociate from the particularity of Judaism or felt limited to it expressed her hybridized, shifting identity in terms of an ability to maintain and cultivate difference as something from within and beyond commitments to culture, language, religion, race, gender or any other conventional categories. She welcomed and embraced the tensions and contradictions of being both Jewish and a humanist as a dynamic state of being.

19 Marthie Momberg, “Why activists? A case-study into the self-perceived motivations of selected South Africans and Jewish Israelis in the Palestinian project” (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2017), 87.

Those who did not associate with a specific religious tradition acknowledged the role of their world and existential views. For some it included a desire for interconnectivity in a non-theistic harmony with nature and people in the pursuit of a better world:

I'm an atheist. I mean I'm very, very secular ... But at the same time I have to say that the notion of hope to make the world better and to stick to doing something and taking responsibility when I see injustice, this in itself may be the definition of religion, action in a way, because we transcend something. You go beyond the reality and you work from an inner – I don't know – power that you cannot sometime[s] understand what it is. Maybe some people will say it's God, this is God who is in us. I think I would say, no, that is the humanity in us and this human instinct or whatever is there to do the things.²⁰

At least a third of the respondents – whether they associate with a specific tradition or not – articulated existential views as a relation, not only to a God, but as a sense of belonging in a wider sense to include the earth, nature, all sentient beings and the cosmos and their place in the universe. They made it explicit that religion is more than rituals, a world view, symbolism and culture and might be profoundly spiritual and ethical. A Christian, for example, spoke of his impression of a cosmic connection that transcends space and time. His awareness grew slowly and over several years and he felt humble in the realisation that

I'm no different to any other human being on this earth. I'm connected with all that is on this planet, with the cosmos. But I'm also connected to people who came millions of years ago. Whether they had heard about Jesus or not, is not the point. They had a sense of there is something bigger, you know, than me. And so, this Palestinian struggle which sometimes is thought of as so big, is actually just a small thing within the bigger scheme of things.²¹

Given these differences in religious orientations, what were the crosslines between solidarity, faith, spirituality and agnosticism?

20 Momberg, "Why Activists," 122.

21 Momberg, "Why Activists," 147.

3. Religion: a reason for activism?

I was aware from the outset that religion, whether in a constructive or in a destructive role, could play a role, but I did not frame any questions as such. Yet the topic of religion and how it relates to their activism was often raised by the respondents and themes relating to the role of religion/spirituality and humanism/being human in the dynamic praxis of activism were respectively the second and the third most dominant in the case study.

3.1 Consistency in inclusive and plural positions

All argued that religion can be employed to serve different agendas and they utterly rejected the claim that the Palestinian struggle forms part of a religious clash. In South Africa, for example, Christianity was used both to justify apartheid and to fuel the struggle against it and in Israel, ultra-orthodox Jewish communities are often anti-Zionist. Hence, they were adamant that people are responsible for their religious interpretations and that not all Jews support Zionism. No-one viewed the issue as a Muslim struggle, or a struggle against Judaism. None of them argued for the rights of one faith over another, or claimed a city, or a piece of land for the sake of religion. In their views the issue is not about a specific faith *per se*, but rather how sacred texts and religion are used to discriminate and oppress, or to liberate. In their views *the issue at stake is the human rights aspect and how it relates to imperialism, apartheid, and other forms of discrimination*.

Whether religious or not, they argued that in the context of the Palestinian struggle all three monotheistic faiths need to repent and recover the justice and the humaneness that inspire them. A former Muslim who now considers himself as post-paradigmatic with an appreciation for a non-dogmatic, humanist positioning of religion, for example, drew on the example of Judas Iscariot to explain the dangers of compromising justice and equality for agendas of power or money. Secular Jews who are troubled by the problematic relation between Judaism and Zionism referred to prophets such as Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos and the Judaism of their upbringing that taught them to not dominate or oppress, but to treat others – fellow activists, opponents and the oppressed – the way one wants to be treated by them. To be a *Mensch* is rooted in Jewish ethics, they said. “One does not stop the perpetrator out of fear, anger, or hatred, but because they are violating humanity” and one has “a moral obligation to do everything

to stop them ... but that doesn't make them less human to you".²² They perceived all people as equal before God, even if someone committed the worst atrocities. Thus, all are infused with the Spirit (or the Breath) of the Transcendent, or, in biblical terms, are created in the image of God. "If we don't see the humanity of other people, including our enemies, then just struggles can easily become unjust" and therefore human beings should not trespass onto God's domain by judging others, or by speaking on behalf of God, noted a Muslim.²³

Those who did not identify with being religious voiced pluralist positions and some referenced also the Bible, the Torah, the Koran and the Buddha. A Jewish atheist, for example, expressed his "deep respect" for socially involved faith communities "who don't become pious and who don't put the rules in me. As soon as they step back, I become very interested in their faith symbols".²⁴ Another who was raised with Islam and is no longer religious, admired religions that oppose oppression and foster a shared humanity. Being "dogmatically opposed to religion is problematic", he added.²⁵ A woman who does not have a relation with God remarked, "I don't have that higher being feeling. I would be terrible. I don't have it. No, I don't believe in it".²⁶ Yet she was explicit about the importance of religious freedom for all in Israel and Palestine.

Both nationalities expressed a deep empathy for the horrific persecution of Jews and simultaneously viewed post-Holocaust guilt that renders Jewish suffering as more important than the suffering of other people as of great concern. Zionism as a "colonial ideology" was regarded to be "the root of this whole problem ... but what makes it so powerful and so easy to identify with for so many people, is the story of the Holocaust and the narrative of the Jews as the ultimate oppressed group".²⁷ The two Christian respondents' were alarmed about how Christianity is used to promote Zionism's double standards. They highlighted the urgency for thorough

22 Momberg, "Why Activists," 203.

23 Momberg, "Why Activists," 202.

24 Momberg, "Why Activists," 198.

25 Momberg, "Why Activists," 197.

26 Momberg, "Why Activists," 197.

27 Momberg, "Why Activists," 158.

theological discernment since the integrity of Christianity is at stake.²⁸ That many Zionists claim that Genesis 1 and 2 apply only to them and to no-one else were deemed particularly disconcerting. These Christians argued that it is important not to be silent when churches and political parties such as South Africa's African Christian Democratic Party publicly support Zionism's theology, rationale and epistemology and to make it known that there are indeed Christian voices who understand the need for justice and hear the voice of the oppressed. The “image of God of Christianity ... has been so dragged in the mud by, first the Israeli State, the Zionist state, but also by the Christian Western Zionism and the complacency of the rest of the Christian world”, therefore, “(u)less we uncover the true face of Christianity for that region it seems as if we can't make sense anywhere else”.²⁹

The respondents' inclusive and pluralist understandings of the role of religion corresponded with their unanimous conviction to advocate for a shift away from fundamentalism, patriarchy, exclusivism and discrimination towards feminism, humanism and having safe, healthy, happy, inclusive co-habitation with equal rights. Thus, despite their various religious orientations and the concomitant tensions of difference, their respective personal frameworks for understanding their place on this planet and beyond corresponded with their expressed public logic of overcoming division and discrimination. These views of the role of religion were informed by values that were explained both from religious

28 In 2017 the General Council as the highest decision-making body of the World Communion of Reformed Churches unanimously adopted a resolution that acknowledged and confessed “that the Christian faith has been used to justify the injustice against the Palestinian people. Any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth ... The ongoing condition of occupation, and the continuing denial of Palestinian rights has cast a shadow over generations of Jewish Israelis who have borne the social, psychological and spiritual burdens of the role of occupier”. The General Council affirmed “with respect to the situation of injustice and suffering that exists in Palestine, and the cry of the Palestinian Christian community, that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake”. (Chris Ferguson, “Proceedings of the 26th General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches,” minutes of the Public Witness Committee, 2017:354–355. [Online]. Available: <http://wcrc.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GC2017-Minutes-EN.pdf>

29 Momberg, “Why Activists,” 158, 239.

and existential perspectives and through arguments that transcended traditional boundaries that locate people in mono-identities.

3.2 In the pursuit of integrity

All – including former Christian and Jewish Zionists – ascribed the rise of their activism to the values and life views that were in place before they became sensitised on the plight of the Palestinians.³⁰ While for many their values may be expressed in their religious frameworks it does not mean that they necessarily root their value commitments in their faith. A woman who converted from Hinduism to Islam, for example, explained that her values and her concomitant passion for human rights and social solidarity existed before she converted to Islam. She failed to see a connection between her ethics and the Hindu rituals of her upbringing and converted to Islam because of the way it resonates with her values. However even as a Muslim she used to think of the matter as a clash between Jews and Muslims, before realizing that it is a human rights struggle.

Whether religious or not, all were inspired by cooperation with people from other affiliations than their own on the basis of shared, inclusively positioned values. The core values that inspired the respondents' activism were compassion and altruistic love, justice and equality as well as honesty and truth. These values were perceived as overlapping concentric circles around the axis of a shared humanity where all human lives have equal value, making discrimination unacceptable. Their impressions of the role of compassion and altruistic love, for example, had an impact on their understandings of justice and equality. Likewise, impressions of honesty and the degree of truth influenced their praxis of altruistic love and justice. Thus, they aspired to, and valued expanded altruistic selves (not narrow, selfish interests) in a plural experience of the world in which their opponents' humanity is also recognised and valued. In the end, it was about experiencing relief in their own lives if the marginalised other (the

30 An earlier article on the respondents' entry to Palestinian struggle concluded that the central issue they all "faced and affirmed regarding their committing to activism was a desire to align their existing inner values with the outer reality they encountered in and through the Palestinian struggle". (Marthie Momberg, "Israeli and South African citizens' motivations for joining the Palestinian struggle," *LitNet Akademies* 16, no. 2 (2019): 26. [Online]. Available: https://www.litnet.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LitNet_Akademies_16-2_Momberg_23-46.pdf

Palestinians) have dignified lives too. Although the need for these values were argued from different orientations none claimed ownership for her/his understanding as exclusive to only her/his convictions, or spoke from positions of superior religiosity, or on behalf of God. No matter what their personal religious associations were, all shared the commitment to similar, interconnected values within the framework of a shared humanity.

They deemed inappropriate any dialogue, including interfaith discussions and relations that in form and content is not structured to reflect the asymmetry of a human rights struggle, but instead mimics a binary “conflict”. In their views, such bi-lateral engagements deepen the divide, it lacks moral integrity, it attempts to normalise relations in an unjust system, and it frustrates or sabotages a pursuit of justice. The task of Jewish Israelis and other non-Palestinians, they argued, is first to listen and then to end the injustice. In hindsight, an Israeli woman thought of her dialogue group in Israel as “terrible”, because despite having one Palestinian and one Israeli facilitator they never discussed the power difference. She and others argued that it is inappropriate to have an oppressor and an oppressed to speak as equals when one group is actively oppressing the other. Such discussions can deteriorate into insincere political jargon and become a way to buy time to confiscate more Palestinian land, to construct more illegal settlements and to prolong the oppression of Palestinians. Instead it is necessary to agree on certain values in an approach that values honesty, truth and justice. Having conversations is not wrong, a Muslim, argued, but it should be in the pursuit of resolving the problem: “Let us have an understanding that international law is the basis. Let’s just have some primary things that we have to take as a given and then we can learn how to share this land”³¹.

The respondents act because of the harm which has been done to the Palestinians and which Israel inflicts on its own society. Their desire for moral consistency was expressed both as a personal quest in their own relations, and as a yearning for a communal shift from selfishness, dualism and alienation to inclusive, life-enhancing relations between all Palestinians and Israelis. The crux for them remains their consistent

31 Momberg, “Why Activists,” 225.

embodiment of values, as opposed to a selected application of worthy values. For them having integrity means being authentic, genuine, whole, undivided and consistent in applying morally sound values. It requires rigorous honesty at multiple levels, and it is characterised by an internal locus of control. Thus, the shared motivator for activism in the case study was not religion, but the respondents' quest for moral consistency – as part of a future dispensation and in their current interactions with the oppressed, the oppressor, audiences, the public and fellow activists.

3.3 As part of a larger ethical struggle

No-one positioned their advocacy as a geographically defined or a nationalist project, as the only struggle worthy to be involved in, or as something in need of only a political or a structural solution. The misrepresentation of sacred texts and religious traditions for political and socio-economic purposes, the fanning of fear, the spread of false information, racism, classism, sexism, power abuse and militarism are all seen as forming part of a polarizing ethos used to justify Zionism. Israel's collusion with global powers such as the U.S. its massive military industry complex, the paramilitary industry and the economic incentive to maintain and deepen the occupation of Palestinians, for example, is part of a much bigger conversation that transcends the borders of Israel-Palestine.³² Trails of Israeli ammunition and security services, funded by the U.S., lead into countries such as South Sudan, Eritrea, Syria and others in a global project of militarisation, they highlighted.

The activists were concerned with the underlying dynamics, the consciousness and/or mind-sets at play, and how the conflation of Zionism

32 Joint training between U.S. and Israeli police forces is a common practice and the Minneapolis police who are accused of murdering George Floyd in May 2020 were from such a police department ("USACBI statement in support of Black liberation and movements confronting racist police," U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel. [Online]. Available: <https://usacbi.org/2020/06/usacbi-statement-in-support-of-black-liberation-and-movements-confronting-racist-police> [Accessed: 8 June 2020]. The US contributes more funding to Israel than it has contributed to any other country since the World War II. Unlike other beneficiaries of the US, Israel may use the money for military purposes (Jeremy Sharp, "U.S. Foreign aid to Israel," Congressional Research Service, report prepared for Members and Committees of Congress, last updated August 7, 2019. [Online]. Available: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>

with religion obscure, distract and manipulate public opinion in promoting exclusivist political and socio-economic power. The correction of such notions was another reason for activism for many. Whether they campaign against xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Zionism, or for the rights of refugees, black lives and gender equality, they noted links between the Palestinian matter and other struggles for equality, human dignity and justice in other countries that are all part of a matrix of othering. The Palestinian struggle does not duplicate these other causes, but it mirrors and crystalizes them, or it brings them into sharper focus. As such all viewed the Palestinian struggle as a very important site of reflection for global issues and the need to ask, “What are the building blocks? It’s not just economics. It is culture, it is aesthetics, it is about how do we humanise a human condition. What do we value?”.³³ The points of tangency with other issues heighten the global imperative to solve the Palestinian issue and it is this holistic perspective, rather than nationalism or a desire to privilege a specific religion, that inspired them. Their point of departure is not a national state, but the moral state between people from different orientations.

3.4 Meaning and aesthetics

The dimension of meaning and worthwhileness was not qualified as one-directional, self-centred or simplified experiences of satisfaction, fulfilment, happiness, contentment, or victorious assuredness, but as gratifying, reflexive and relational. Moreover, these experiences were not perceived as motivating factors and this aspect was generally not raised by the respondents of their own accord. Fulfilment was perceived to come through connections between people, through growing in understanding and feeling expanded and liberated, sustained, energised and enriched. Being part of a wider circle of like-minded people with similar values and a shared passion for an ideal greater than limited self-interest, nourished them. Meaning and worthwhileness were associated with gratitude for being allowed to be, and being welcomed as partners in the Palestinian struggle as well as moving towards wholeness, closure and healing, and finally with relief and empowerment by being connected to something

33 Momberg, “Why Activists,” 146.

much bigger than being a person in a country participating in a particular cause.

Three respondents – one Christian and two other South Africans who deem themselves not religious – spoke out of their own of aesthetic experiences. Their poetic descriptions of basic, but eternal values conveyed impressions of the significance of human life and that which cannot be grasped. The paradox of sensing something more, something holy and perhaps even healing when confronted by something so tragic and horrible evoked a sense of spiritual expansion that transcends earthly limitations and led them to ponder the power of imagination and the symbolic value of reality. Images of the Palestinians' grace and resilience juxtaposed by the rubble of bombed houses, schools and hospitals, dilapidated infrastructure, death, disablement and desolation highlighted an interconnectedness between beauty and ugliness as expressed, for example, by someone who does not consider himself religious:

That beauty and happiness revolves around those people who are fighting against the carriers of misery and of brutality and of ugliness ... this might sound horrible, but there is beauty in the Gaza Strip amidst the rubble and the poverty when people try and support each other with the little they have. There is beauty in a Nazi Concentration Camp when some of the condemned show ways of supporting each other.³⁴

4. Conclusion

Israel's ethnic, militarised settler-colonial project of more than seventy years has turned into an ever-tightening grip that seems set to destroy Palestinians' history, identity, livelihood, presence, civil rights and lives. The juxtaposition of and the overlap in the respondents' reasons contextualise crucial moral questions and understandings tied to religious notions in a contested space that many have come to accept as inevitable and permanent. Their reasons for holding tensions of difference while at the same time navigating between orientations in their intersectional, transnational quest for integrity appeal to the praxis of theology in a global dispensation where

34 Momberg, "Why Activists," 280.

millions of human beings and nature increasingly struggle to breathe. Their values of honesty and inclusive justice, equality and compassion and their rejection of silence and apathy challenge theologies that perpetuate a meta-narrative of imperialism, discrimination, militarism, oppression, racism, deception, power abuse, greed, dehumanisation and other forms of state violence. It is precisely because of, and not in spite of, their different understandings of theological, religious, spiritual and other existential notions that the respondents' views may add some nuances and texture to religious language and are of interest to the sociology of religion. Thus, the value for theology lies in the interplay between the differences amongst the respondents on the one hand, and their shared aims, values, meaning making and so forth in a complex, interrelated, lived experience on the other hand. The dedication in the face of great resistance and the analysis of plural, ecumenical, grassroots narratives that include secular voices may be relevant also to public theology and its focus on human rights, human dignity and the dynamics between religion and social identity. That said, it is important to note that neither the study nor this article aims to inform the sociology of religion and/or public theology by prescriptively offering conclusions that can be generalized, but it offers the groundwork for further research in these disciplines.

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