

Evangelical Christians Risk Setting Middle East on Fire

Jonathan Cook explains why the wave of pro-Zionist preachers taking an interest in Israel is bad news for Palestinians and loaded with ominous historic precedent.

On Monday Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo addressed the annual summit of Christians United for Israel, espousing Christian Zionist support for the state of Israel. Jonathan Cook takes a deep look into this phenomenon.

By **JonathanCook**

in Nazareth

Jonathan-Cook.net



The recent arrival of Africa's most popular televangelist preacher, TB Joshua, to address thousands of foreign pilgrims in Nazareth produced a mix of **consternation and anger** in the city of Jesus's childhood.

There was widespread opposition from Nazareth's political movements, as well as from community groups and church leaders, who called for a boycott of his two rallies. They were joined by the council of muftis, which described the events as "a red line for faith in religious values."

Joshua's **gatherings**, which included public exorcisms, took place in an open-air amphitheater on a hill above Nazareth that was originally built for papal masses. The site was **used** by Pope Benedict in 2009.

The Nigerian pastor, who has millions of followers worldwide and calls himself a prophet, aroused local hostility not only because his brand of Christianity strays far from the more traditional doctrines of Middle Eastern churches. He also represents a trend of foreign Christians, driven by apocalyptic readings of the Bible, interfering ever more explicitly in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories – and in ways that directly aid the policies of Israel’s far-right government.

Much-Needed Tourism Boost

Nazareth is the largest of the Palestinian communities in Israel that survived the Nakba, or catastrophe, of 1948, which forced most of the native population out of the bulk of their homeland and replaced it with a Jewish state. Today, 1-in-5 Israeli citizens are Palestinian.

The city and its immediate environs include the highest concentration of Palestinian Christians in the region. But it has long suffered from the hostility of Israeli officials, who have starved Nazareth of resources to prevent it from becoming a political, economic or cultural capital for the Palestinian minority.

The city has almost no land for growth or industrial areas to expand its income base, and Israel has tightly constrained its ability to develop a proper tourism industry. Most pilgrims pass through briefly to visit its Basilica of the Annunciation, the site where the angel Gabriel reputedly told Mary she was carrying Jesus.

Nazareth’s municipal officials leapt at the chance to exploit the publicity, and income, provided by Joshua’s

visit. The municipality's longer-term hope is that, if the city can attract even a small proportion of the more than 60 million Christian evangelicals in the U.S. and millions more in Africa and Europe, it will provide an enormous boost to the city's economy.

Recent figures show evangelical tourism to Israel has been steadily rising, now accounting for about 1-in-7 of all overseas visitors.

Playing with Fire

But as the fallout over Joshua's visit indicates, Nazareth may be playing with fire by encouraging these types of pilgrims to take a greater interest in the region. Most local Christians understand that Joshua's teachings are not directed at them – and, in fact, are likely to harm them.

The Nigerian pastor chose Nazareth to spread his gospel, but faced vocal opposition from those who believe he is using the city simply as the backdrop to his bigger mission – one that appears entirely indifferent to the plight of Palestinians, whether those living inside Israel in places such as Nazareth, or those under occupation.

Political factions in Nazareth noted Joshua's "ties to far-right and settlers circles in Israel." He is reported to have had meetings about opening operations in the Jordan Valley, the reputed site of Jesus' baptism but also the agricultural backbone of the West Bank. The area is being targeted by the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu for settlement expansion and possible annexation, thereby dooming efforts to create a Palestinian state.

A View of Armageddon



During his visits to Israel, Joshua has also enjoyed access to key government figures such as Yariv Levin, a close ally of Netanyahu's, who has been in charge of

two portfolios viewed as critical by the evangelical community: tourism, and the absorption into Israel of new Jewish immigrants from the U.S. and Europe.

Many in the evangelical community, including Joshua, believe it is their duty to encourage Jews to move from their home countries to the Promised Land to bring forward an end-times supposedly prophesied in the Bible.

This is the Rapture, when Jesus returns to build his kingdom on earth and righteous Christians take their place alongside him. Everyone else, including unrepentant Jews, it is implied, will burn in Hell's eternal fires.

The cliff above the Jezreel Valley where Joshua and his disciples congregated offers views over Tel Megiddo, the modern name of the biblical site of Armageddon, where many

evangelicals believe the end of the world will soon happen.

Speeding up the Second Coming

These Christians are not simply observers of an unfolding divine plan; they are active participants trying to bring the end-times closer.

In fact, the traumas of the Israel-Palestine conflict – the decades of bloodshed, violent colonization and expulsions of Palestinians – cannot be understood separately from the interference of Western Christian leaders in the Middle East over the past century. In many ways, they engineered the Israel we know today.

The first Zionists, after all, were not Jews, but Christians. A vigorous Christian Zionist movement – known then as “restorationism” – emerged in the early 19th century, predating and heavily influencing its subsequent Jewish counterpart.

The restorationists’ peculiar reading of the Bible meant that they believed the Messiah’s second coming could be accelerated if God’s chosen people, the Jews, returned to the Promised Land after 2,000 years of a supposed exile.

Charles Taze Russell, a U.S. pastor from Pennsylvania, travelled the world from the 1870s onwards imploring Jews to establish a national home for themselves in what was then Palestine. He even produced a plan for how a Jewish state might be created there.

He did so nearly 20 years before the Jewish Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl published his famous book outlining a Jewish state.

The secular Herzl didn't much care where such a Jewish state was built. But his later followers – deeply aware of the hold of Christian Zionism in Western capitals – focused their attention on Palestine, the biblical Promised Land, in the hope of winning powerful allies in Europe and the U.S.

Rallying Cry for Herzl's Followers

Imperial Britain's support was especially prized. In 1840, Lord Shaftesbury, who was connected through marriage to Lord Palmerston, a later prime minister, published an advert in the London Times urging the return of Jews to Palestine.

Christian Zionism was an important factor influencing the British government in 1917 to issue the Balfour Declaration – effectively a promissory note from Britain that became the blueprint for creating a Jewish state on the ruins of the native population's homeland.

Writing of the declaration, Israeli historian Tom Segev has observed: “The men who sired it were Christian and Zionist and, in many cases, anti-Semitic.” That was because Christian Zionism took as its premise that Jews should not integrate into their own countries. Rather, they should serve as instruments of God's will, moving to the Middle East so that Christians could achieve redemption.

Edwin Montagu was the only British cabinet minister to oppose the Balfour Declaration, and he was also its sole Jewish member. He warned – for good reason – that the document would “prove a rallying ground for anti-Semites in every country in the world.”

'Struggle Until the Rapture'

While Jewish Zionists looked to the imperial powerhouse of Britain for sponsorship a century ago, today, their chief patron is the U.S. The standard-bearers of Christian Zionism have been enjoying growing influence in Washington since the Six-Day War of 1967.

That process has reached its apotheosis under President Donald Trump. He has surrounded himself with a mix of extreme Jewish and Christian Zionists. His ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, and Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt, are fervent Jewish supporters of the illegal settlements. But so too, it seems, are key Christians in the White House, such as Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Before he entered government, Pompeo was clear about his evangelical beliefs. Back in 2015, he told a congregation: “It is a never-ending struggle ... until the Rapture. Be part of it. Be in the fight.”

This past March, he backed the idea that Trump might have been sent by God to save Israel from threats such as Iran. “I am confident that the Lord is at work here,” he told the Christian Broadcasting Network.

Pence, meanwhile, has said: “My passion for Israel springs from my Christian faith ... It’s really the greatest privilege of my life to serve as vice-president to a president who cares so deeply for our most cherished ally.”

Sleeping Giant Awakens

Trump’s relocation last year of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, pre-empting any negotiated settlement of the

Israel-Palestine conflict, was designed to pander to his Christian Zionist base. Some 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for him in 2016, and he will need their support again in 2020 if he hopes to be re-elected.

Not surprisingly, the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem was consecrated by two prominent televangelist pastors, John Hagee and Robert Jeffress, known for their fanatical support for Israel – as well as occasional anti-Semitic outbursts.

More than a decade ago, Hagee, the founder of Christians United for Israel, told delegates at a conference organized by AIPAC, Israel's main political lobby in Washington: "The sleeping giant of Christian Zionism has awakened. There are 50 million Christians standing up and applauding the state of Israel."

The Hagee group's activities include lobbying in Congress for hardline pro-Israel legislation, such as the recent Taylor Force Act that slashes U.S. funding to the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinians' government-in-waiting. The group is also active in helping to push through legislation at the state and federal levels, penalizing anyone who boycotts Israel.

For U.S. evangelicals, and those elsewhere, Israel is increasingly a key issue. A 2015 poll showed some three-quarters believe that developments in Israel were prophesied in the Bible's Book of Revelation.

Many expect Trump to complete a chain of events set in motion by British officials a century ago – and more and more of them are getting directly involved, in hopes of

speeding along that process.

Closer Ties to Settlers

Israel's vision of an "ingathering of the exiles" – encouraging Jews from around the world to move to the region under the Law of Return – fits neatly with Christian Zionism's beliefs in a divine plan for the Middle East.

The efforts of extremist Jewish settlers to colonize the West Bank, the bulk of any future Palestinian state, also chimes with Christian Zionists' understanding of the West Bank as the "biblical heartland," an area Jews must possess before Jesus returns.

For these reasons, evangelicals are developing ever-closer ties with Israeli Jewish religious extremists, especially in the settlements. Recent initiatives have included online and face-to-face Bible studies programs run by Orthodox Jews, often settlers, targeted specifically at evangelical Christians. The tutorials are designed to bolster the settlers' narrative, as well as demonizing Muslims and, by extension, Palestinians.

The most popular course offered by Root Source, one such venture, is titled "Islam – Insights and Deceptions." It uses the Old and New Testaments to make the case that Islam "is extremely dangerous."

A few months ago, Haaretz, Israel's leading liberal newspaper, published an investigation into the growing flow of evangelical volunteers and money into the West Bank's illegal settlements – the chief obstacle to achieving a two-state solution.

One U.S. organization alone, Hayovel, has brought more than 1,700 Christian volunteers over the past 10 years to help in a settlement close to Nablus, in the heart of the West Bank.

Infusion of Evangelical Money

An increasing number of similar initiatives have been aided by new rules introduced last year by the Israeli government to pay Christian Zionist groups such as Hayovel to advocate abroad for the settlements.

It is much harder to know exactly how much evangelical money is pouring into the settlements, because of a lack of transparency regarding U.S. donations made by churches and charities. But the Haaretz investigation estimates that over the past decade, as much as \$65 million has flowed in.

Ariel, a settler town sitting in the very center of the West Bank, received \$8 million for a sports center from John Hagee Ministries a decade ago. Another evangelical outfit, J H Israel, has spent \$2 million there on a national leadership center.

Other Christian charities that have historically funded projects inside Israel are reported to be increasingly considering assisting the settlements too.

Should a Trump peace plan – touted for publication later this year – back annexation of parts of the West Bank, as is widely expected, it would likely unleash a new and even greater wave of evangelical money into the settlements.

Immune to Reason

This is precisely the problem for Palestinians, and the

wider Middle East. Christian Zionists are meddling yet again, whether they be government officials, church leaders or their congregations. Evangelical influence is to be found from the U.S. and Brazil to Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia.

Western governments typically have more practical and pressing concerns than realizing biblical prophecy to justify divide-and-rule policies in the Middle East. Chiefly, they want control over the region's oil resources, and can secure it only by projecting military power there to prevent rival nations from gaining a foothold.

But the uncritical support of tens of millions of Christians around the world, whose passion for Israel is immune to reason, makes the job of these governments selling wars and resource grabs all the easier.

Both Israel and the West have benefited from cultivating an image of a plucky Jewish state surrounded by barbaric Arabs and Muslims determined to destroy it. As a result, Israel has enjoyed ever greater integration into a Western power bloc, while Western governments have been offered easy pretexts either to interfere in the region directly or delegate such interference to Israel.

The payoff for Israel has been unstinting support from the U.S. and Europe, as it oppresses and drives the Palestinians off their lands.

With an evangelical base behind him, Trump has no need to offer plausible arguments before he acts. He can move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, or approve the annexation of the West Bank, or attack Iran.

Standing Against Israel's Enemies

Seen this way, any enemy Israel claims to have – whether the Palestinians or Iran – automatically becomes the sworn enemy of tens of millions of evangelical Christians.

Netanyahu understands the growing importance of this uncritical overseas lobby as his and Israel's standing drops precipitously among liberal U.S. Jews, appalled by the rightward lurch of successive governments.

In 2017, Netanyahu told a crowd of evangelicals in Washington: “When I say we have no greater friends than Christian supporters of Israel, I know you’ve always stood with us.”

For Palestinians, this is bad news. Most of these evangelicals, such as T B Joshua, are largely indifferent or hostile to the fate of the Palestinians – even Palestinian Christians, such as those in Nazareth.

A recent editorial in Haaretz noted that Netanyahu and his officials were now “endeavoring to make evangelicals – who support Israel's hawkish rejectionism regarding the Palestinians – the sole foundation of American support for Israel.”

The truth is that these Christian Zionists view the region through a single, exclusive prism: whatever aids the imminent arrival of the Messiah is welcomed. The only issue is how soon God's “chosen people” will congregate in the Promised Land.

If the Palestinians stand in Israel's way, these tens of millions of foreign Christians will be quite happy to see

the native population driven out once again – as they were in 1948 and 1967.

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This article is from his blog at [Jonathan Cook.net](http://JonathanCook.net).

Mike Pompeo's Deranged Foreign Policy

The U.S. secretary of state is a Christian zealot who sees the U.S. as incapable of doing ill, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By [Lawrence Davidson](#)

TothePointAnalysis.com



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo started out the new year—the date was Jan. 10—preaching “the truth” about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and for reasons we will get to below, he chose to do so at the American University in Cairo. He implied that he was particularly capable of discerning the truth because he is “an evangelical Christian” who keeps a “Bible open on my desk to remind me of God and His Word, and The Truth.” This confession indicates that Pompeo is wearing ideological glasses through which he cannot possibly see the world, much less the Middle East, in an objective fashion. We can assume that the decidedly unthinking and amoral president he serves has no problem with this prophet in the State Department because Pompeo is one of the few cabinet ministers whom President Donald Trump has not fired.

So what are Pompeo's versions of foreign policy truth? In terms of his Cairo pronouncements, they are twofold. First, as is to be expected of a man of his temperament (he declared: "I am a military man" who learned his "basic code of integrity" at West Point), he has identified the true enemy of the civilized world. And, again not unexpectedly given his Christian zealotry, the enemy is of Muslim origin. It is the "tenacious and vicious" cabal of "radical Islamism, a debauched strain of the faith that seeks to upend every other form of worship or governance."

Notable Omissions

This initial "truth" is noteworthy for what it does not take into consideration, such as traditional U.S. alliances with brutal and corrupt military or monarchical dictatorships. Any move to reduce support for such regimes in the Middle East is, in Pompeo's view, a "misjudgment" that must have "dire results." As long as these dictatorships oppose what Pompeo opposes, their brutality and corrupt nature can be judged acceptable. For example, Pompeo praised his host, the military dictator of Egypt, Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil El-Sisi, who is an archetypical example of this murderous breed of ruler. He praised El-Sisi exactly because he has joined the U.S. in the suppression of "Islamists." The Egyptian dictator, in Pompeo's words, is "a man of courage."

Pompeo's second "truth" is the self-evident fact of American exceptionalism. He told his listeners that "America is a force for good in the Middle East." Pompeo does not articulate the reference, but his claim taps into the Christian image of the U.S. as "a shining city on the

hill”—a God-blessed light unto the nations. This was one of Ronald Reagan’s favorite themes.

As proof of American’s alleged beneficence, Pompeo makes a series of dubious claims about the behavior of the United States government. Here are a few. Comments within brackets are those of this author:

“For those who fret about the use of American power, remember this: (No.1) America has always been, and always will be, a liberating force.” [Since World War II we have been liberating dictators from their own rebelling people.] (No.2) “We assembled a coalition to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein.” [The subsequent two Gulf Wars plus the U.S. imposed sanctions regime killed at least half-a-million Iraqis.] (No.3) “And when the mission is over, when the job is complete, America leaves.” [Unless the “liberated” countries’ government wants Washington to establish bases which, it seems, they almost always do. The U.S. now has some 800 military bases in 70 countries around the world.] (No. 4) The U.S. and its allies helped destroy most of ISIS, and in the process “saved thousands of lives.” [There is no official number for the civilians killed in the so-called war on terror, of which the campaign against ISIS is but a part. However, there is no doubt that, to date, it is at least in the high hundreds of thousands.]] (No.5) “Life is returning to normal for millions of Iraqis and Syrians.” [Unless you have a really perverse definition of “normal,” this is a total fantasy.]

Rescuing Foreign Policy

According to Pompeo, achievements No. 4 and No. 5 are due to the “fact” that President Donald Trump rescued U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Rescued? Rescued from what? From the foreign policy of Barack Obama, of course.

“America, your long-time friend, was absent too much. Why? Because our leaders gravely misread our history, and your historical moment. These fundamental misunderstandings, were set forth in this city in 2009.”

That claim was a direct reference to former President Obama’s speech calling for a “new relationship with the Muslim world” delivered on June 4, 2009, at nearby Cairo University. That is why Pompeo came to Egypt to make his speech, which is in essence, an indictment of Obama’s foreign policy.

In brief, in 2009 Obama, who also claimed in his Cairo talk to be speaking the truth, had referenced the negative impact of Western imperial and colonial history toward the Middle East, and then took a pro-democracy stance that, if carried into policy, would have weakened support for traditional dictatorships in places like Egypt. Obama saw a connection between the brutality of such dictatorships and the spread of religious fanaticism—a connection that was stronger than “radical Islamist” ideology alone. Obama also implied that President George W. Bush’s post 9/11 policy, which led not only to the unnecessary invasion of Iraq, but also to a policy of official torture, resulted in the United States “acting contrary to our ideals.” In addition, Obama was ready to negotiate with those seen as enemies by Pompeo, as symbolized by his willingness to make a deal with Iran.

Pompeo, the Christian zealot who sees the U.S. as incapable of doing ill, cannot objectively consider or perhaps even understand Obama's positions. He dismisses them as a "misreading" of history. Obama's brief and, in truth, largely ineffective, wavering from traditional Middle East foreign policy had, in Pompeo's view, introduced "the age of self-inflicted American shame." If Pompeo is short on historical understanding, he is long on hyperbole.

Retreat and Chaos

One of Pompeo's more disquieting propositions is that "when America retreats, chaos often follows."

Alas, at least in the Middle East, the exact opposite is true—chaos comes from invasion. This can be demonstrated by the consequences of the actions of President George W. Bush. It was Bush's invasion of Iraq, the results of which were predictable, that opened the region to chaos, including the growth of ISIS. The Iraq invasion also opened the flood gates of an ongoing refugee crisis (which the Syrian civil war—arguably prolonged by U.S. involvement—made even worse). Subsequent intervention in Libya, under Obama's watch, only intensified the turmoil. However, none of these actions, or the misery they inflicted, seems have bothered the Christian sensibilities of Pompeo.

Examining the history of events can give us guides, albeit imperfect ones, for present policies and behaviors. A necessary precondition to making the most of this examination is the ability to do so as objectively as possible. Otherwise, to use Pompeo's phrasing, we end up "making bad mistakes." Part of the process is to be able to

recognize the actual causes of events and to know when to discard traditional practices that no longer take you where you want to go.

Yet here is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisting, on the one hand, on maintaining outworn policies that support dictators. These policies have not produced the stability he thinks they have, but have rather helped bring about the very chaos he attributes to Obama. On the other hand, his Christian fundamentalism has blinded him to any objective understanding of Middle East history and America's role in that region. That is why he ends up stating contradictions. For instance, toward the end of his talk he tells us (No. 1) "the Trump administration will also continue to press for a real and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians" and (No. 2) "we've adhered to our word. President Trump campaigned on the promise to recognize Jerusalem—the seat of Israel's government—as the nation's capital. In May, we moved our embassy there." Those two statements are in direct contradiction to each other. However, Pompeo misses this fact entirely. This is a product of ideology compounded by ignorance.

This being the case, Mike Pompeo and Donald Trump make for strange bedfellows. Of course, both are ignorant. But, the nearest thing Trump has to an ideology is his egotism and that infamous "gut" of his that ostensibly tells him what is right and wrong. He certainly is not a believing Christian nor even an American chauvinist, but rather he is a personal chauvinist who thinks of himself as a personification of the U.S.

If Pompeo and Trump share anything (besides ignorance), it

seems to be a firm dislike for everything connected to Obama. We know that Trump may well be obsessed with Obama, perhaps for racist reasons. As one Democratic Party adviser has noted, "His [Trump's] only guiding principle seems to be to undo what Obama did. His driving motivation seems to be his animosity towards Obama." Mike Pompeo seems in lockstep with his boss in this regard. After all, Pompeo went out of the way to indict Obama, blaming him for the death of thousands, and doing so in the same city where Obama gave his most promising Middle East initiative. Pompeo's actions in this regard were personal and spiteful.

So here we have it. What motivates Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: (No. 1) Christian zealotry (No. 2) American exceptionalism and (No. 3) a personal dislike of the first black president of the United States. In terms of the position he holds in the government, this is a losing combination for the rest of us. Personally, I would not trust this man to guide the ongoing relationships between my own neighbors and me, so you can imagine my horror at having to put up with him as secretary of state.

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Ukraine-Russia Tensions Rise in Church Row

With an apparent nod from the U.S., the Ecumenical Patriarch's ruling from

Istanbul severed 1000-year ties between Moscow and the Orthodox church in Ukraine, raising further tensions between Kiev and Moscow, as Dmitry Babich reports.

Moscow's Role in Ukraine Orthodox Church Ended

By Dmitry Babich

Special to Consortium News



The Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, an authority completely outside Ukraine, on Oct. 11 stripped away the canonical authority of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (MP), sparking a crisis with Russia.

The 1030-year old church is headed by Patriarch Kirill in Russia and the Russian church responded by severing ties to the Istanbul patriarch. Tensions have now been raised even further in the crisis between Ukraine and Russia that erupted after the U.S.-backed 2014 coup in Kiev that overthrew an elected president who tilted towards Moscow.

In Washington, the events were reported in *The Washington Post* as part of Ukraine's struggle to “withdraw from Moscow's control.” In Europe, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini made the sober warning in the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* that the religious interference in Ukraine could provoke a war.

Bartholomew's action is seen as a first step to giving full autonomy, known as “autocephaly” in the Orthodox faith, to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kiev Patriarchate (KP), a

heretical split-off that was created only in 1992 just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's independence.

The KP church is headed by a self-styled leader named Mikhail Denisenko, who goes by the name Patriarch Filaret. He is a defrocked former bishop in the Moscow Patriarchate of Ukraine.

The MP's lineage goes back to the tenth century Christian conversion of all the people of Kievan Rus, the proto-state that was precursor to the nations of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Its authority in Ukraine was established in 1686 by the same Constantinople Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Bartholomew reversed his seat's own 332-year-old decision. While the Ecumenical Patriarch is known as "the first among equals," among Orthodoxy's 14 autocephalic churches, he has no authority to rule over them. Unlike Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy has no single church authority that can impose decisions over all the others.

The 14 churches are supposed to be independent of governments. But in Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, the anti-Russian president installed after the coup, and other government forces, are using the ruling to further erode Russian influence.

Members of the Moscow church in Ukraine have already been the targets of violent assaults by thugs trying to disrupt worship services, and such conflict is being fueled by politicians' rhetoric.

In October, when Constantinople lifted Denisenko's ex-

communication, Poroshenko called the decision “[a victory of good over evil, light over darkness.](#)” He also said that recognition of the renegade Ukraine church would mean severing all links to Orthodox Russia and its “[Moscow demons,](#)” reported gazeta.ru.

Bartholomew’s decision didn’t come out of thin air, and the geopolitical implications are clear: breaking Russia’s ties to the Ukrainian people. [This was demanded by Poroshenko,](#) and supported by Denisenko, whose church has never been recognized by the 14 other churches.

On Oct. 31, Denisenko made his view clear in a [statement to RFE/RL.](#) “We will be striving to have a single Orthodox Church in Ukraine and to make sure that the Russian [Orthodox] Church is not hiding under the Ukrainian name while, in essence, it is Russian,” he said.

Moscow Responds

“Constantinople’s decision is [aimed at destroying unity,](#)” Kirill explained, as reported in Russian language media. “We can’t accept it. That is why our Holy Synod took the decision to stop eucharistic communication with the Constantinople Patriarchate.” He added that the attack against the Orthodox in Ukraine “was having not only a political, but also [a mystical dimension.](#)”

He called for faithfulness to the canonical church, the Moscow Patriarchate, and says he’s “[ready to go anywhere](#) and talk to anyone” to prevent the schism among the Orthodox inside Ukraine and remove barriers separating the faithful in the two countries.

The break in eucharistic communication means that the priests of the two patriarchates won't be able to hold church services together.

While Western media have played the break as an aggressive act by Moscow, the reality is more complex. The Russian Orthodox Church is the largest congregation among the approximately 300 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Kirill went to Istanbul to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch in August to try to avert any actions that would harm the unity.

Metropolitan Hilarion, chief spokesman on questions of schism and unity for the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow, explained, "For a church with more than 1000 years of history and ancient monasteries of some 500 to 900 years of age, the perspective of merging with some unrecognized entities, formed 20 years ago, is unacceptable."

On October 31, Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the action against the Ukrainian church in remarks to the World Congress of Russian Compatriots, an organization uniting people of Russian origin from all over the world. "Politicking in such a sensitive sphere as religion has always led to grave consequences, first and foremost for the people who got involved in this politicking," he said. He also referenced a "war" on Russian historical monuments by some forces in Ukraine.

Washington's Hand

In the past year, discussions were held by U.S. officials with Poroshenko and Denisenko. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Sam Brownback](#), and Assistant

Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs [Wes Mitchell](#) met with Denisenko in September. Then on Oct. 17, a press release in the name of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for religion in Ukraine to be “without outside interference.”

That statement came four days after Bartholomew recognized the breakaway Ukrainian church.

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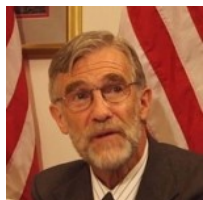
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Will ‘God’ Save Kavanaugh?

That attitudes may not have changed from an older generation to Kavanaugh’s – and may have gotten still worse, and not only at elitist Georgetown Prep, but in society at large – is sad beyond telling, says Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Special to Consortium News



“Are boys really better than girls? I know you are one, but please try to be fair,” asked eight year-old Helen in a letter to God.

From my own experience while a callow youth at a Jesuit boys-only high school, I believe it highly unlikely that Georgetown Jesuit Prepster Brent Kavanaugh ever thought of asking God the question Helen posed. For Kavanaugh, as for the rest of us, the answer was self-evident – much clearer than 13th century Thomas Aquinas’s “proofs” for the existence of God.

At my Jesuit high school, as at Kavanaugh’s, the concept of God-like male supremacy was deeply entrenched – from the priests and other all-male faculty to the *bonhomie* of the young “good-natured men” in the smoke-infested Senior Room.

The Jesuits encouraged us to think of ourselves – each one of us – as exceptional, down to the last man, so to speak. It was Lake Wobegone on steroids. We had been pre-selected to become the future leaders of the sole exceptional country in the world – an ethos that prevails, in spades, at Georgetown Prep.

Happily, we were spared Aquinas’s “insights” on women, whom he described as defective, misbegotten males. It was not until college that I learned Thomas deemed women “the result of some debility ... or of some change effected by external influences, like the south wind, for example, which is damp, as we are told by Aristotle.”

Is God ‘One of the Boys’

Even without Aquinas, though, the culture of the Prep spoke loudly, if less directly, of the subordinate status of women. It should come as no surprise, then, that this prep-school milieu left us precocious adolescents quite comfortable with an all-powerful God who was “one of the boys.”

For me, though, high school was a half-century ago. The reality that attitudes have not changed between my generation and Kavanaugh’s – and may have gotten still worse, not only at Jesuit-run elitist Georgetown Prep, but in society at large – is sad beyond telling. Can we forget that the 2016 election went to a man who bragged about sexually assaulting women? “When you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.” ... and that this same man is now defending Kavanaugh “all the way.”

To Be Fair

Taking a cue from eight year-old Helen, let's try to be fair. Who among us is without blame? Most of us still refer to God as "he." And how many of us still visualize the Last Supper, through the oils of Leonardo da Vinci, as a stag party rather than the traditional Passover meal it was – with women and children galore. (Psst! DaVinci wasn't even there.)

Perhaps worst of all, how many of Catholics join Kavanaugh in bowing submissively to the arbitrary ban on women priests, a prohibition based not on Scripture or the practice of the first-century Church, but rather on out-and-out misogyny.

In his kid-gloves interview on Fox Tuesday evening, Kavanaugh again denied having sexually assaulted anyone, pointedly adding, "I have faith in God." But the tide has turned. This has become clearer with every new accusation against him, plus the unseemly rush by Judiciary Committee Chair Charles Grassley (R, Iowa) and his ten white male Republican apostles to ram through the confirmation. Like the protagonists of the Greek tragedies – Kavanaugh will need a *Deus ex Machina* to pluck him out of his distress. "Supportive" comments on Wednesday from the aforementioned "star," who now happens to be president, are not going to help.

Those who know Washington are aware that the closest thing to an all-powerful God is a congressional committee chairman. But it does not help Kavanaugh's candidacy when Sen. Grassley seems to know nothing other than the power-over type of God – the same model that dominated what Kavanaugh calls his "formative years" at Georgetown Prep.

Throw in Grassley's obtuseness and insensitivity, and add a pinch of omniscience from the likes of Sen. Orin Hatch (R, Utah) and you have a recipe that could spell defeat. Asked why he branded "phony" the very recent allegation by Deborah Ramirez, a Yale classmate of Kavanaugh, Hatch snapped, "Because I know it is, that's why."

If Kavanaugh's nomination does reach the Senate floor, what will be most interesting of all will be to observe the degree to which Senators Susan Collins (R, Maine) and Lisa Murkowski (R, Alaska) have themselves internalized male supremacy – whether of God or of demigod Republican committee chairmen.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He holds a Certificate in Theological Studies from Georgetown University.

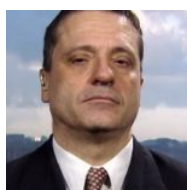
Letter from Britain: The Real Reason for the 'Anti-Semite' Campaign Against Jeremy Corbyn

Panic drives the smear attack against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn whose background as a radical socialist, not his criticism of Israel and support for the Palestine, threatens the British establishment's hold on power, argues Alexander Mercouris.

By Alexander Mercouris

in London

Special to Consortium News



Any discussion of the current “anti-Semitism crisis” in the British Labour Party needs to start with an understanding that there is no “anti-semitism crisis” in the British Labour Party, or in Britain.

Anti-Semitism did once have a place in British society. By way of example, readers of Agatha Christie stories written before World War II will come across stock anti-Semitic representations of Jewish characters. As recently as the 1970s, I can remember what would today be considered Semitic stereotypes being commonly used to represent Jewish people in many of the unfunny comedy shows broadcast by British television in that period, including some the BBC broadcast.

Racist stereotyping of this sort was commonplace in Britain right up to the 1970s, and was certainly not exclusive to Jews, as Irish people, black people and people from the Indian subcontinent well recall. Some still persists today, but by and large racial stereotyping is socially unacceptable, except (worryingly) with respect to Russians.

By comparison with other European countries, anti-Semitism in Britain has, however, not been a major phenomenon in modern British society and recent British history. There has been no official persecution of Jews in Britain since they were allowed to resettle in England by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s, while the attempt by Oswald Moseley's British Union of Fascists to stir up political anti-Semitism in the 1930s provoked fierce resistance.

Jewish people now play a full and active role in British life, and this happens without notice or comment.

As for the formal institutions of Britain's Jewish community, these form an integral part of British life. The chief rabbi has enjoyed a measure of recognition as the nominal leader of the British Jewish community from the British state ever since the 1870s. Since the 1980s, by convention, the chief rabbi has been admitted to the British Parliament as a peer of the House of Lords, though the present chief rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, has not yet been so admitted. The British Jewish community's major institution—the Board of Deputies of British Jews—has had a continuous existence since the 1760s.

Though there are anti-Semites in Britain as there are everywhere else, they are very much a minor and ugly fringe, and moreover a generally despised and disliked one, with no influence or traction in British politics or in British life.

Despite lurid claims to the contrary, actual cases of anti-Semitic violence and property damage in Britain are relatively few, and certainly appear to be less than other types of racial violence.

Indeed, Jewish people today are so much an integral part of British society and of British life that I for one question whether it is even accurate to speak of a distinct "Jewish establishment" among British Jews. Rather, it seems to me that it would be more accurate to say that there are some prominent British Jews and some prominent British Jewish institutions—such as the chief rabbi and the Board of Deputies of British Jews—which today form an integral part of the larger British establishment, whose general perspectives and interests they share.

Which brings me to the present "anti-Semitism" campaign against Jeremy Corbyn.

The Left-Wing, Anti-Imperialist Labour Tradition

The British Labour Party was formed in 1900 before World War I, and if there has been one political movement in Britain that has stood rock solid against all manifestations of anti-Semitism in British life (perhaps more than any other group), it is the British Labour Party, and first and foremost its left wing.

This is consistent with the traditional stance of the left wing of the British Labour Party, which can be broadly defined as anti-racist, anti-fascist, and, above all, anti-imperialist. The latter has been important in a country like Britain—historically the preeminent imperialist power—where imperialism was justified in racist terms. British left-wing anti-imperialists, who are mostly drawn from the working class (a fact which gave British anti-imperialism a strong class-conflict character) strongly were predisposed to be anti-racist.

Not surprisingly, British Labour left-wing anti-racism extended to staunch

opposition to anti-Semitism, which is, of course, the reason why so many British Jews were drawn to the Labour Party in the first place.

The key point to understand about Corbyn is that it is from within this left-wing, anti-imperialist Labour tradition that he comes. His parents after all first met each other in the 1930s attending a rally in support of the Spanish Republic at the time of the Spanish Civil War. He has been loyal to the traditions of the Labour Party's anti-imperialist left ever since he began his career in politics, as his long record of opposition to all the West's interventionist wars shows. Needless to say, that includes strong and consistent anti-racism and the opposition to anti-Semitism which goes with it. Strikingly, Corbyn's acceptance speech following his election as Labour leader included a declaration of support for refugees.

To insinuate that Corbyn is an anti-Semite—as is increasingly happening—and to insinuate that the left wing of the Labour Party to which he belongs is riddled with anti-Semitism and poses an “existential threat to British Jews” (as several of the British Jewish community's newspapers have alleged) is more than just absurd. It stands reality on its head. Corbyn is not an anti-Semite. Anti-Semitism, on the contrary, is what he always has defined himself against, and to claim otherwise is dishonest and even surreal.

Corbyn's well-known support for the Palestinian people's struggle does not contradict his opposition to anti-Semitism. Rather, it is the product of his consistent anti-imperialism, making Corbyn's support for the Palestinians and his opposition to anti-Semitism consistent.

All this is well understood by those who are conducting the anti-Semitism campaign against Corbyn within the Labour Party and outside it. Corbyn has been a fixture of British political life ever since he was first elected a member of Parliament in 1983. The British establishment—including those members of the British establishment who are Jewish—know him well, and they know well what his actual beliefs are. It is not credible that they believe him to be an anti-Semite, or that they think that the left wing of the British Labour Party, which supports him, is riddled with anti-Semitism.

The Push to Stop Corbyn

The essential mendacity of the whole anti-Semitism campaign and the true motives behind it is shown by the exceptionally narrow frame of reference in which it is being conducted. It is universally acknowledged that the allegations of anti-Semitism being made against Corbyn and some of his supporters stem from Corbyn's longstanding support for the Palestinian people's struggle and his equally longstanding criticisms of Israel's response to that struggle. As'ad AbuKhalil

has discussed this aspect of the affair for Consortium News with great thoroughness and detail.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the criticisms being made against Corbyn barely touch on the Palestinian question at all. Anyone looking at these criticisms for a discussion of the Palestinian issue, even one from a position sympathetic to Israel and hostile to the Palestinians, will fail to find it.

The Palestinian struggle, the plight of the Palestinian people, the whole history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the current policies both of Israel and of the Western governments which support it, are barely mentioned. When Palestinians do get mentioned at all, it is purely as terrorists. The entire campaign is being conducted as if Corbyn and those who support him hate Zionism and Israel and therefore all Jews.

It is, of course, impossible that those who are conducting the campaign against Corbyn are any more ignorant of the basic facts of the Palestinian struggle and of the Arab-Israeli conflict than they are ignorant of Corbyn's actual beliefs. If they are not mentioning these facts, it is not because they are ignorant of them. It is because they choose not to mention them.

In other words, the campaign against Corbyn has very little to do with the situation in the Middle East. I say this, though I have no doubt that the Israeli embassy is playing an active role in the campaign, a fact which is apparently freely admitted within Israel itself, though not in Britain.

However, it is a mistake to see the campaign against Corbyn as principally Israeli inspired. If it were, I would expect those conducting it to say far more about the situation in the Middle East than they do. Nor, in my opinion, is the campaign exclusively or even primarily the work of British Jews. As it happens, the Jewish community in Britain is far from united behind the campaign, with many British Jews expressing doubts or even outright opposition to it.

Instead, the campaign should be seen for what it is: the latest in a long series of attacks by the British establishment against Corbyn, the one British politician who more than any other embodies the threat to the current status quo and to the British establishment's hold on power.

These attacks have at various times sought to portray Corbyn as a Communist, a Russian agent, a terrorist sympathizer and a traitor. Adding a charge of anti-Semitism to this catalogue is an obvious further step, and given Corbyn's well-known advocacy of Palestinian rights an easy one. The only surprise is that it has not happened before.

That the anti-Semitism campaign is the latest in a long series of establishment

attacks on Corbyn, which extend all the way back to his election as Labour's leader, is shown by the sheer breadth of the campaign. The parliamentary Labour Party, the entire Conservative Party and the media (including the BBC and the supposedly left-wing *Guardian* newspaper) have all embraced it. Certainly, it extends far beyond those members of Britain's Jewish community who form part of the greater British establishment and who initially spearheaded it. As it happens, the great majority of British politicians and commentators who have joined in the campaign are non-Jews.

A New Political Dynamic

As for the campaign's greater vehemence by comparison with earlier campaigns, that is the product of the changed political dynamic in Britain since the June 2017 general election.

Before that election, the British establishment did not take Corbyn seriously, since it assumed that the British electorate would reject him in any election which he fought. The horrifying realization following the June 2017 election that the opposite is the case has—not surprisingly—caused panic and has led to the establishment pulling out all the stops. That explains not just the greater vehemence of this campaign but why it has persisted for so long.

In other words, what is driving the campaign is not some overarching loyalty on the part of British Jews to Israel or a belief that Corbyn is an anti-Semite. Rather, it is British establishment panic. As Britain's Conservative government disintegrates, Corbyn stands poised to become Britain's next prime minister. That terrifying prospect—of a radical socialist in 10, Downing Street—is one which must be averted at all costs. That is the reason for the anti-Semitism campaign we have been witnessing, and thus all the other campaigns against Corbyn we have witnessed, of which there are certainly more to come.

While the causes of the anti-Semitism campaign are mainly domestic, there is a wide consensus among Corbyn's supporters that he has not handled his response to the campaign well. The general opinion—that he has been far too accommodating to his critics—has been forcefully argued in Consortium News by [Jonathan Cook](#).

Corbyn himself has conceded too much ground on anti-semitism. As a lifelong anti-racism campaigner, the accusations of anti-semitism have clearly pained him. He has tried to placate rather than defy the smearers. He has tried to maintain unity with people who have no interest in finding common ground with him.

And as he has lost all sense of how to respond in good faith to allegations made in bad faith, he has begun committing the cardinal sin of sounding and

looking evasive – just as those who deployed the anti-semitism charge hoped. It was his honesty, plain-speaking and compassion that won him the leadership and the love of ordinary members. Unless he can regain the political and spiritual confidence that underpinned those qualities, he risks haemorrhaging support.

This widespread view that Corbyn has been accommodating to people who seek only his destruction has even produced some curious examples of drafts of “speeches” written for him by some of his sympathizers setting out the sort of things which they think he should say.

While I have considerable sympathy for this view, I think it is only fair to add that Corbyn happens to be one of the most polite and diffident personalities in British politics. The contrast with, say, Donald Trump in the United States, could not be greater. It is not in Corbyn’s nature to respond to his critics with the same forcefulness that they extend to him. While this makes Corbyn an indifferent orator and blunts his impact in debates in the House of Commons, his politeness and diffidence is an integral part of his appeal. To call on him to act differently is to call for a different man, with no guarantee that that man would command anything remotely approaching the level of support that Corbyn has.

Is the Campaign Working?

It is important to stress this point because as of the time of writing it is far from clear to me that—contrary to what Jonathan Cook fears—this latest campaign against Corbyn is succeeding.

The poll numbers barely have shifted, with Conservative and Labour both polling around 40 percent of the vote since the June 2017 general election, and most opinion polls put Labour ahead. Though the anti-Semitism campaign may have lost Labour some Jewish votes in places like the London district of Barnet, the generality of the British voters seem indifferent and unimpressed by the whole affair.

I suspect that the truth is that Corbyn has been around in British politics for so long that the British electorate long ago formed its view of him. Knowing Corbyn as well as they do—as well as the left-wing tradition from which he comes—the vast majority of British center-left voters who make up Corbyn’s electoral base find the whole idea that he is an anti-Semite just too fantastic to take seriously. Besides the fact that the anti-Semitism campaign is merely the latest in a series of campaigns against Corbyn launched from the moment he became Labour’s leader makes the true motives of his critics in the end

altogether too obvious.

Cook has expressed the fear that if the Labour Party adopts the four additional working examples of anti-Semitism drafted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)—which it has hitherto resisted doing because of the way they limit criticism of Israel—that will make future criticism of Israel by Corbyn and by other members of the Labour Party all but impossible, and will open the way to a purge of Palestinian sympathizers within the Labour Party. [Editor's note: The Labour Party altered its anti-Semitism definition on Sept. 4 at its National Executive Committee meeting and adopted the four additional working examples of anti-Semitism drafted by the IHRA.]

Similar concerns have been expressed by Norman Finkelstein, who sees the whole attempt to impose any sort of definition of anti-Semitism on the Labour Party as an attack on the party's traditions and on free speech.

These concerns are far from groundless. On the contrary, there is no doubt that silencing criticism of Israel is very much a part of the agenda of some of the people behind the campaign, with the British establishment (not just its Jewish part) united in support of Israel in the same way as are the political establishments of all the other Western countries. Consider, for example, this extraordinary article by Andrew Feldman in *The Evening Standard*, a newspaper edited by former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's friend and former Chancellor George Osborne, which contains this passage:

Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin. Anti-Zionism is the belief that the state of Israel should not exist. That it should be dismantled. This is not the same as saying, quite legitimately, that you disagree with the policies of the current or any other Israeli government; or calling for the reversal of the settlement programme in the West Bank; or demanding a return to earlier borders and the creation of a two-state solution.

Some historical context is important here. Two thousand years ago, at the end of a long and bloody revolt, the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were dispersed far and wide, across the Roman Empire and beyond. They settled in many places. Some made them welcome for a time. Others less so. Jewish people lived in a constant state of trepidation. Periods of peace and prosperity punctuated by pogroms, inquisition and expulsion.

In Europe, the Holocaust was the crescendo of centuries of rumbling antipathy. Jews sought to escape the horror but the numbers who found refuge were pathetically small. Even the UK only accepted 70,000 Jewish refugees before

the Second World War and 10,000 during it.

Quite simply, there was nowhere for them to go, so six million people perished out of a total global Jewish population of 17 million.

Finally, after this destruction, the world decided that enough was enough. The Jewish people needed their own place to go when things went wrong. And the ancient homeland was chosen. It was to be shared with the Palestinians on lines established by a United Nations resolution in 1948.

This was not the only work for the cartographers after the Second World War. The demise of empire, the calls for national determination and the need for pragmatic solutions brought about the creation of new states in Europe, Africa, the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in the Middle East. Lines were drawn on maps. Sometimes they respected geographical, religious and tribal boundaries; sometimes they did not. Everyone was doing the best they could to make sense of the cataclysmic events of the previous decades.

The State of Israel served its purpose. A national homeland for the Jewish people existing alongside the Jewish communities that continued to live around the world. And when things did not go well for some of those communities – in Russia, Iraq, Morocco and elsewhere – it was a place of sanctuary. It accepted refugees in huge numbers without question.

Note that the Palestinians are barely mentioned in the whole article, which claims that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism and does so by linking anti-Zionism to the whole history of anti-Semitism in the West, culminating in the Nazis and the Holocaust.

Needless to say, though Feldman appears to admit that it is legitimate to criticize Israel, he makes no criticisms of Israel anywhere in his article. In practice, on the basis of his article, it is difficult to imagine what criticism of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians Feldman would not define as anti-Semitic.

Having said this, it is important to retain perspective. Even though the Labour Party changed its anti-Semitism definition, that will not end criticism of Israel within the Labour Party or in British society. Corbyn himself will not change his views, nor will other supporters of the Palestinian struggle within the Labour Party or in British society.

Ultimately, what is causing the growing criticism of Israel in Britain as elsewhere are Israeli policies, and attempts to silence criticism of those policies by conjuring up the specter of anti-Semitism or by resorting to purges

and inquisitions that can only, in the end, threaten to provoke a backlash.

How the Anti-Corbyn Campaign Is Like Russia-gate

The anti-Semitism campaign against Corbyn in Britain bears more than a passing resemblance to the Russia-gate scandal in the United States.

In both countries, the establishment has been shocked by popular insurgencies on the right and left and the rise of a seeming outsider: Corbyn in Britain, and Trump (with far less cause) in the U.S. In both countries, this has provoked a shrill establishment campaign against the outsider. In both countries, the allegations which form the basis of the campaign—of anti-Semitism in the case of Corbyn, of being an agent of the Russians in the case of Trump—are to anyone with even a basic grasp of reality utterly fantastic. In neither country does the sheer absurdity of the allegations seem to matter for those who have invested in the campaign. Instead, the political class in both countries pretends to believe them, while the media has embraced them. A media effort has been made to link Corbyn to Russia too.

In both countries, interested outside powers are involved in the campaigns—Israel in the case of the anti-Semitism campaign against Corbyn in Britain, Britain and some other U.S. European allies in the Russia-gate scandal against Trump in the U.S. But the origins of both campaigns are domestic.

In both Britain and the U.S., the core electoral base of both Corbyn and Trump remains unmoved by the hysteria and the swirl of allegations, but in the meantime, real damage to the political system is being done. Both countries are unable to formulate rational foreign policies, whether with respect to the situation in the Middle East in the case of Britain, or with respect to relations with Russia in the case of the U.S.

Corbyn and the movement he leads have far deeper roots within British society than Trump does in the U.S. There has been a continuous tradition of political radicalism in Britain going back to the period of the French Revolution. Corbyn stands squarely within that tradition, a fact which is perhaps better understood in Britain than it is outside it. That tradition for the moment is rising in the case of younger Britains.

That, of course, is why, against all expectations, Corbyn, was elected leader of the Labour Party, and why, again contrary to all expectations, he increased the Labour's share of the vote so dramatically in the June 2017 general election.

That is reason for the intensity of the campaign against him, but it also explains why he has been able to withstand it up to now. The shape of British politics in the future will be determined by whether or not he is able to

continue to do so.

Alexander Mercouris is a political commentator and editor of The Duran.

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The Unlikely Force Behind US Prison Reform

If a conservative is a liberal who gets mugged, then a prison reformer is a conservative who goes to prison, as John Kiriakou explains.

By John Kiriakou

Special to Consortium News



Prison and sentencing reform have long been an important issue for the political left. The United States has five percent of the world's population and 25 percent of the world's prison population. Congress creates 50 new crimes every year. That's 500 things that were legal a decade ago that are now felonies. It's no wonder the prisons are full.

Liberals are concerned because so many poor people and people of color are in prison. One out of every four black men in America is in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole. The numbers are astounding. The rest of the world looks at us and shakes its collective head—especially our European allies.

The truth, though, is that prison reform and sentencing reform are not reserved for the left. In fact, evangelicals and conservatives have been leaders in the reform movement since the 1970s. Chuck Colson, who had been Richard Nixon's special counsel and hatchet man during the Watergate years and who served eight months in a minimum-security prison for Watergate-related crimes, found his Christian faith there and created Prison Fellowship, now the oldest and largest Christian-oriented prison ministry and reform organization in the country. Its success has spawned countless similar organizations.

Prison Fellowship has become known especially for its program that sends Christmas presents to the children of indigent prisoners and for its provision of bibles and religious literature to prisoners at the federal, state, and local levels. The trend for Christian organizations involved in prison work, though, has changed over the past 20 years or so, ever since President Bill Clinton

toughened the already harsh Reagan-era anti-drug laws that have filled American prisons. Now, many of those groups are advocating for legislation that would change sentences, guidelines, and in some cases, the entire system.

Most recently, Congress has twice come up with bipartisan bills that would reshape the entire federal sentencing regime. Supporters thought they had a real chance in 2014 when a bipartisan group of senators, led by Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and John Cornyn (R-TX) introduced the Recidivism Reduction and Public Safety Act of 2014. The bill easily passed the Senate Judiciary Committee. A similar bill, the Smarter Sentencing Act of 2013, also passed the committee. Both bills also sailed through the House Judiciary Committee. They died on the Senate floor, though, when then-majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) refused to call them up for a vote. A year later, the new majority leader, Mitch McConnell (R-KY) also refused to allow a vote.

Both bills, which would have eased sentencing guidelines, done away with mandatory minimum sentences for most drug crimes, and offered incentives for federal prisoners that would have allowed early release for good behavior and for taking GED or vocational classes, had the support of groups as diverse as the American Civil Liberties Union, the conservative Heritage Foundation, former prosecutors, police and prison guard organizations, victims' advocates, prominent conservatives, and faith groups. But nothing happened.

Four years later, with Donald Trump in the White House and Republicans controlling both houses of Congress, that could change. Certainly, evangelical and conservative interest in prison and sentencing reform has not diminished. Craig DeRoche, senior vice president for advocacy and public policy at Colson's Prison Fellowship, told Religion News Service in May, "There's never been greater interest in America for criminal justice reform. We have a lot of hope. This administration is genuinely interested in second chances." De Roche added that, while Prison Fellowship and other Christian organizations have worked on prison reform with every president since Jimmy Carter, the group's access to the Trump White House is "unprecedented." Part of the reason, he said, was that the prison population has so ballooned in the past 20 years that the issue has "touched many Christians personally."

I would add that the driving force behind the Administration's interest in prison and sentencing reform is presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner, whose father Charles was convicted in 2004 of 18 counts of making illegal campaign contributions, tax evasion, and witness tampering. The elder Kushner was sentenced to 24 months in prison. He served 14 months and completed his sentence in a halfway house in Newark, New Jersey. The younger Kushner has been a reform advocate ever since. And that's where hope lies.

In May the House of Representatives passed a bipartisan prison reform bill by a vote of 360-59 that would immediately send home 4,000 prisoners, provide free sanitary napkins to all incarcerated women, outlaw shackling during childbirth, and make it easier for inmates to earn time under house arrest or in halfway houses. President Trump endorsed the bill just a few days after it passed the House.

The problem is, and has always been, in the Senate. In June, Kushner met with Cornyn and Whitehouse, as well as Reps. Doug Collins (R-GA) and Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), to strategize on how to move the bill forward in the Senate. Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Chuck Grassley (R-IA), has his own reform bill that is more comprehensive than Kushner's. But it runs the risk of alienating other key Republicans, including Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Trump himself. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) already has said that he will seek to block it.

But now there's finally some good news. Trump has proven to be truly interested in reform. He met in early August with Republican senators and told them that he is supportive of a new reform proposal that would combine Kushner's "First Step Act," the Grassley proposals, and the original provisions of the 2013 and 2014 bipartisan bills. Trump told the assembled senators, "Do some work with your colleagues and let's see where the Senate is and then come back to me with it." That's as far as any reform bill has gotten in a generation.

Here are the provisions as things stand now:

- The bill would lower lifetime mandatory minimum sentences for people with prior nonviolent drug felony convictions to 25 years;
- It would reduce 20-year mandatory minimum sentences for similar offenders to 15 years. This would apply only to new sentences and would not be retroactive;
- It would apply the Fair Sentencing Act, which Congress passed in 2010 and which reduced the disparity between cocaine- and crack-related offenses, retroactively;
- And it would expand exceptions to the application of mandatory-minimum sentences to more people with criminal histories.

The bill is popular and is moving forward because of that support from

evangelicals and conservatives. Conservative icon Richard Vigeurie [said in the New York Times](#) in 2013 that, “Conservatives should recognize that the entire criminal justice system is another government spending program fraught with the issues that plague all government programs. Criminal justice should be subject to the same level of skepticism and scrutiny that we apply to any other government program.” He added that three principles—public safety, compassion, and controlled government spending—lie at the core of conservative philosophy. He’s right. And it’s evangelicals who are focused on the “compassion” aspect.

All of this is great, right? But it ignores the single most important reason that people are in prison in the first place—drug abuse. The federal Bureau of Prisons has a program that’s supposed to help people get off drugs and reintegrate into society. It’s called the Residential Drug Abuse Program, or RDAP. It’s a joke. There is precious little money dedicated to RDAP. And in most prisons it consists only of 11 weekly meetings where prisoners gather to watch taped reruns of the A&E Network program “Intervention.” Seriously. That’s it. There is no counseling, no therapy, no drug education, no vocational training. Nothing. That’s where conservatives should focus. If the government isn’t going to do anything about it, shouldn’t the churches? Wouldn’t it be practical for every church in America to help one single prisoner get off drugs and learn a trade or finish a high school diploma? It would certainly be cheaper and it probably would be more efficient than the system we now have.

Overall, a lot of Congress members want to do the right thing here. Reform is truly bipartisan. The political stars have aligned. It’s time to get it done. Conservatives should push reform forward and declare victory.

John Kiriakou is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. John became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act – a law designed to punish spies. He served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempts to oppose the Bush administration’s torture program.

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Religious Divisions Threaten to Further Inflammate Ukrainian Civil War

Not admitting the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to Kiev is like barring the Pope from Rome, but that is just what the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government

has done, explains Dmitry Babich.

By Dmitry Babich

in Moscow

Special to Consortium News



During the American Civil War, in which 620,000 people were slaughtered on the battlefields alone and hundreds of thousands more injured, the organization of the Roman Catholic Church in the American north and south remained united throughout the war and after.

The same cannot be said for the four-year-old civil war in Ukraine, which has deepened existing divisions among Orthodox Christians in the country.

Tensions are rising to the point that the Ukrainian government has been accused of suppressing the celebration of the 1030th anniversary of the coming of Christianity to ancient Rus, the proto-state of Eastern Slavs, which included the territories of modern Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The government is being blamed for involvement in an effort to eliminate the original historic church of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), because of its affiliation with Russia and the word “Moscow” in its name.

The UOC-MP currently includes more than 12,000 of about 18,000 parishes in Ukraine, and is headed by Ukrainian Metropolitan Onuphrius, under the higher spiritual authority of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus, seated in Moscow.

On July 27, a solemn march celebrating the 1030th anniversary of the baptism of Rus by Prince Vladimir the Great of Kiev in 988 AD drew 250,000 faithful of the UOC-MP in Kiev despite the attempt to sabotage it by the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government of President Petro Poroshenko. According to numerous testimonies by UOC-MP’s priests, published in the Ukrainian press, transportation was cut off from outlying parishes and believers were intimidated.

But, if we believe the government, these actions weren’t a suppression of religion, but rather “required by a specific situation.” The Poroshenko regime, formed in the beginning of the civil war that followed the U.S.-backed 2014 bloody coup in the “Euromaidan” uprising, is favoring a split-off of the traditional church by an anti-Moscow church known as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) headed by a self-proclaimed leader named Patriarch Filaret (born, Denisenko).

Denisenko, a former cleric of the Moscow Patriarchate, left the UOC-MP in 1992 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. He had lost an ecclesiastical election and tried to form his own church. Denisenko was then excommunicated.

His church is not recognized by any of the other members of the international community of Orthodox churches.

There is no single authority in the Orthodox Churches similar to the Roman Catholic pope; rather there are independent or auto-cephalic regional Patriarchs considered equal in authority, with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), regarded as first among equals (*primus inter pares*) primarily for historic reasons because Constantinople, before its takeover by Turks in 1453, was the center of Orthodox Christianity.

None of these Orthodox Patriarchates recognize either the UOC-KP or "Patriarch" Filaret Denisenko. But now the Poroshenko government, together with Denisenko, is moving to reverse that situation. They have called on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul to remove the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate and recognize a new, single independent Orthodox church in Ukraine, severing all ties to Moscow.

The single church in the Poroshenko-Denisenko plan would carry the UOC-KP name with the authority, according to Denisenko, to seize all churches, temples, chapels, monasteries and other properties belonging to the UOC-MP.

It would mean dispossessing the historic UOC-MP, which has direct "apostolic" continuity with the 1030-year-old original Kievan church and Christianity in the Eastern Roman empire, once brought there by Christ's own disciples. UOC-MP said they would not pray in church together with the excommunicated Denisenko.

A Warning from Kirill

Russian Patriarch Kirill, speaking in Moscow at the celebrations of the 1030th anniversary of Vladimir's baptism of Rus, warned against attempts by secular authorities in Ukraine to interfere with church affairs or to split the historic church.

Orthodox faithful inside Ukraine, both ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, see the plans of Poroshenko's government and Denisenko as an illegal assault on their tradition and religious heritage. In addition, some deputies in the Ukrainian Rada (Parliament) have warned that there could be "bloody consequences" if the properties of the UOC-MP are confiscated and its members forced to join a new church.

With a decision from Bartholomew expected next month, events took an important turn with the announcement of a planned Aug. 31 meeting between Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul. The announcement was made in early August through the ROC's press service, which called the upcoming meeting a "very important talk" between the two Patriarchs.

Though the Ecumenical Patriarch doesn't play the same role as the pope in the Roman Catholic Church, Bartholomew is nonetheless in a "make or break" position. All Russia and all of Ukraine will be anxiously watching that meeting, especially after the tensions that surrounded the UOC-MP's celebration in Kiev of the 1030th anniversary of Christianization.

The core issue is that Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox believers have belonged to the same church since Russia's conversion to Christianity in 988 AD. Against this powerful tradition, the government authorities in Kiev are spreading fear against the UOC-MP among some Ukrainian Orthodox believers that has been unheard of since Christianity was de facto "rehabilitated" in 1988 in the former Soviet Union during the celebrations of the 1000th anniversary of the Baptism.

The 1000th year anniversary celebration took place under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who broke the 70 years long tradition of enforced state atheism in the Soviet Union. The USSR had one legal Russian Orthodox Church (persecuted by Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev)— the same that had existed in the Russian empire toppled by Bolsheviks in 1917. Church leaders say Ukraine's government cannot erase the united Church's history, which goes back to Prince Vladimir and to apostolic times.

According to the historical record, the Baptism of Kievan Rus by Vladimir had the support and participation of the Greek Church in Constantinople, then the official church of the Eastern Roman Empire, later known as Byzantium. The first Orthodox bishops and metropolitans (equivalent to Western archbishops) in Russia were Greeks from Constantinople who got their "apostolic succession" from Christ's disciples.

The petition to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to approve the invention of a new "united" Ukrainian church that eliminates the UOC-MP would violate this sacred apostolic succession, says the Moscow Patriarchate. The UOC-MP has also protested that neither Poroshenko nor the Rada are empowered to ask Bartholomew to change the church's organization in Ukraine.

"The strength of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Ukrainian sister UOC-MP lies in the apostolic succession, which the current Ukrainian government can neither provide nor imitate," the Russian Orthodox Church's spokesman said. "The state cannot 'create' a church, nor should it aspire to do it. But this is exactly what the Ukrainian authorities are trying to do, urging the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to merge with Denisenko's entity and asking from the ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople an autocephalous status for this new 'united' Ukrainian church of their own invention."

"This initiative is an abuse of power, an interference of state into church

affairs," UOC-MP's the spokesman said.

The UOC-MP has remained the only public organization in Ukraine which still legally has the word "Moscow" in its name, and for millions of Ukrainian citizens, ethnic Russians or not, any kind of legal linkage to Russia is still valued.

Kiev's Moves Against Russia

Almost immediately after seizing power in 2014, the new regime in Kiev terminated air flights between the two countries and banished Russian television and radio from Ukraine's cable networks. One of the new regime's first acts was to cancel the regional status of Russian language as "one of the official languages" even in those regions of Ukraine, where Russian speakers make up the majority of the population. The measure was reversed after some critical comments from Europe, but it was reinstated a few years later, when the European and American public became more tolerant towards the new Ukrainian regime's whims. Constant attempts are made by the Ukrainian government to shut down the Russian embassy, introduce a new visa regime between Russia and Ukraine or seal the borders, making it extremely difficult for millions of Russians and Ukrainians to see their family members.

The historic role of the Moscow Patriarchate has provided a spiritual and cultural link for tens of millions of people, who in the 1990s suddenly became divided by newly emerged borders. In the period of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 the Russian church proved wiser and more flexible than the Soviet state.

"Russian Orthodox Church then gave its 'periphery' so much autonomy, that this prevented the collapse of the whole structure," said Yevgeny Nikiforov, the head of the Orthodox-oriented radio station Radonezh, and a specialist in Russian church history. "The unified state might collapse in tears, but the church did not follow it. It remained alive and did not give up its right to cater to believers on all sides of the newly emerged borders."

Even in Soviet days the Moscow Patriarchate allowed sister churches in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova to have their own budgets, to appoint their own bishops and to run all their "earthly" activities (education, manufacture of church items, etc.) without consulting Moscow. In return, the Russian Orthodox Church remained in "eucharistic union" with them, with representatives of these churches participating in the election of the Russian Patriarch of the ROC. Believers in all of these countries were treated as equals.

It seems clear why Poroshenko's regime is opposed to the UOC-MP. The church openly condemns the ongoing civil war in Ukraine, refuses to call it "Russian

aggression” and retains the word “Moscow” in its name. In addition, pro-government Ukrainian nationalist organizations often accuse the UOC-MP of being “a pro-Moscow group of separatists in priests’ attire.”

Patriarch Kirill denounced the attempts by Ukrainian authorities to divide and subdue the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-MP while speaking to a convention of the world’s Orthodox churches’ representatives in Moscow on July 27. He underscored what the attempt by the Poroshenko government’s religious takeover means and how it could further inflame the Ukrainian civil war.

“For our church,” Kirill said, “Kiev is the same ... holy place as Jerusalem is for Christians of all creeds.”

Dmitry Babich is a multilingual Russian journalist and political commentator. Born in 1970 in Moscow, graduated from Moscow State University (department of journalism) in 1992. Dmitri worked for Russian newspapers, such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *The Moscow News* (as the head of the foreign department). Dmitri covered the Chechen war as a television reporter for TV6 channel from 1995 to 1997. Since 2003 he has worked for *RIA Novosti*, RT, and *Russia Profile*. Dmitry is a frequent guest on the BBC, Al Jazeera, Sky News and Press TV.

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Israelis Continue to Open Fire on Gaza Protestors: An Eyewitness Account

An Interview with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist, Wafa Al-Udaini

By Dennis J Bernstein



According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the Palestinian death toll since March 30, 2018 “has risen to 33, including 4 children and 1 photojournalist, and the number of those wounded has risen to 2,436, including 410 children, 66 women, 22 journalists and 9 paramedics.”

There have been no Israeli casualties.

According to PCHR, on Friday, April 20th, Israeli snipers “killed 4 Palestinian civilians, including a child, and wounded 274 others, including 41 children, 6

women and 1 journalist, in addition to hundreds suffering tear gas inhalation, including PCHR's fieldworkers who were documenting the Israeli forces' suppression of the entirely peaceful demonstrations near the border fence with Israel, east of the Gaza Strip."

PCHR maintains that "for the fourth week in a row and upon a decision by the Israeli highest military and political echelons, the Israeli forces used lethal force against the peaceful protesters, who did not pose any threat to the soldiers' life." There is a cell phone camera recording now being widely distributed that appears to show Israeli snipers and soldiers cheering as they gun down unarmed Palestinians fleeing in the distance.

On April 17th, I spoke with Gaza-based Palestinian Journalist Wafa Al-Udaini who has been an eyewitness to all the Gaza protests in the ongoing anti-occupation, Right to Return protests since late March. Al-Udaini's friend and colleague, Yaser Murtaja, a photojournalist and camera person for a Gaza-based media production company was shot on April 6th by Israeli sharpshooters and died the next day of his wounds.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, "Pictures posted on social media by local journalists and witness testimony from local journalists show that Murtaja was wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet that were both clearly marked with the words "PRESS" when he was hit."

Today I interview this little brave man. He said, he went to protest peacefully to get back occupied lands #GreatReturnMarch pic.twitter.com/5RMUc9eGNg

– Wafa A Al-Udaini (@wafa_Gaza) [April 18, 2018](#)

In the following interview, Al-Udaini offers an eye-witness recounting of the initial protest in Gaza on March 30th, in which at least 18 protesters were killed by Israeli snipers and well over a thousand people were wounded.

Dennis Bernstein: We are going to hear now some eyewitness accounts, some very troubling testimony of the way in which Israeli snipers, from a long distance away, behind a fence and across a field, began to gun down hundreds of people, wounding over a thousand protesters and killing at least 18 Palestinians on the first day. It was truly horrifying.

Some people were protesting, some were praying, and others, like Wafa Al-Udaini, were sitting down for a meal during the long day of anti-occupation protests, when Israeli snipers opened fire and began to gun down unarmed Palestinians.

Wafa Al-Udaini, tell us a bit of your background and then tell us what you witnessed on March 30th and the other protest days that you were an eye-witness to.

Wafa Al-Udaini: I live here in the Gaza Strip. My grandparents were expelled from Beersheba by Israeli gangs in 1948. Now I live as a Palestinian refugee in the Gaza Strip. I work as a journalist for different websites and on radio. I am also an activist, the leader of a youth group here composed of students and journalists who work to present Palestinian issues to the world.

We were so excited about the Great March of Return protests, which began on the 13th of March. It was a peaceful and secular march, where all Palestinians, male and female, elderly and children, came to the border fence to resist peacefully. I took my family with me and we brought along something to eat and drink. We sat together and shared our food. We were asserting our right to demonstrate and reminding the world of our right to return to the land we occupied before we were driven from our homes. I brought my camera and intended to livestream the event. We were about 700 meters from the Israeli side.

DB: Could you talk about when you realized that the soldiers were opening fire on civilians? Were people around you being shot?

WAU: At the moment, I was interviewing people around me about what life was like before 1948, stories they had heard from their grandparents. Then suddenly I heard shots and I saw people running. I asked what was happening and they told me that the Israelis were opening fire. A man fleeing with his children told me some had been murdered. The Israelis began throwing teargas and they gunned down people who were fleeing.

DB: Let me explain to people that there is the border fence, which is electrified, and then there is a major piece of land between the fence and where the protest was happening. My understanding is that the soldiers were sharpshooters and they were picking people off from the other side of the fence.

WAU: Exactly. It had nothing to do with "defense," because of the distance and because we were unarmed. They fired on women holding the Palestinian flag. This was their crime. Claims of self defense are just ludicrous.

DB: A friend of yours, a journalist, Yaser Murtaja, was gunned down on April 6th. I understand he was wearing his press vest, that clearly marked him as a journalist. He was gunned down and killed by Israeli snipers. Do you think he might have been shot *because* he was wearing his press vest, and the Israelis weren't crazy about there killing fields being broadcast around the world?

WAU: Yes. The Israelis are realizing that they can't continue to fool people indefinitely. This camera footage of all of this flies in the face of any claims that the Israeli army is acting in self defense. These on-the-ground images show Israeli propaganda for what it is.

DB: It appears they are willing to wipe out peaceful protesters while the rest of the world is watching, while the US government continues to provide them with arms, and while the Western corporate press works to bury the real story.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net. You can get in touch with the author at dbernstein@igc.org.

Palm Sunday: History and Tradition

The time for the followers of Jesus to publicly protest injustices such as wealth inequality is at hand, argues retired Baptist minister Rev. Howard Bess.

By Howard Bess

In about 30 CE, Jesus traveled about 70 miles south of his native Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This trip is mentioned in Matthew's, Mark's and Luke's Gospels, all of which describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as the first event of a tumultuous week that ended with Jesus' crucifixion as an insurrectionist and later with his resurrection from the dead. When scholars interested in studying the historical Jesus look for historical certainties in the gospel writings, they almost unanimously identify this trip to Jerusalem as a matter of history, not just tradition or fiction.

Scholars are not of one mind about the details of these three events. The three gospel writers obviously embellished their stories with fiction. There are things we know with reasonable confidence. We know that Jesus being greeted by multitudes in Jerusalem is not remotely possible. This was probably Jesus' only trip to Jerusalem during the short years of his public ministry in Galilee. 70 miles is a long walk. He might have been known by Jerusalem's Pharisees, but the Pharisees would have ignored him. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was more likely a very small political protest march, more like a form of street theatre.

The details of the story, i.e. children waving palm branches and Jesus riding a donkey in fulfillment of a non-existent Old Testament prediction, are more

likely small parts of the process of turning the political nature of the Jesus movement into a new religion that glorifies the political leader. The reality is that Jesus was a religiously devout and practicing Jew, who was killed for his political activities. Those who want to look at the whole process should read Barrie Wilson's book "How Jesus Became Christian." The process of change has left followers of Jesus reciting the Apostles' Creed that deifies Jesus and leaves what he said, taught and lived unsaid. It left Jesus followers asking "what should I believe?" to the exclusion of "what should I be doing?"

On Palm Sunday, 2018, children will once again parade through church sanctuaries waving Palm branches or paper replicas in the celebration of the "triumphal" entry into the city of Jerusalem. It is a tradition that seemingly will not go away. Once again nothing will be said from Christian pulpits about the horror of Roman rule. The Roman rulers were ruthless thieves of land and wealth. They made hard-working laborers into economic slaves. The Roman tyrants in the hinterlands of the Empire shipped stolen wealth back to Rome, where wealthy people had sumptuous living.

The Romans were masters of the vision of greatness. They called it Pax Romana. In fact the Romans had a vast propaganda program that justified the gap between the wealthy and the poor. It was unimaginable no matter what they called it. Jesus saw through all the ugliness, seeing it as a wholesale denial of justice. His entry into Jerusalem was the beginning of a week of protest.

Today, pastors of churches, who are well trained in high quality seminaries, know the context of the ministry of Jesus from Nazareth. Ministers by the tens of thousands know about the ruthless greed that drove the Romans. They know of the compromises that were being made by the priests of the Jerusalem temple. They know about the rage of Jesus at the injustices of the system. They know about the fraud of a triumphal entry but will say nothing. Instead, tradition will triumph once more and children will wave Palm branches once more.

If there is any time in the year when followers of Jesus should massively protest against the evils in our society, it is during holy week beginning with Palm Sunday.

Jim Wallace, editor of Sojourners magazine has chosen the April 2018 edition to call for a return to aggressive protest by followers of Jesus from Nazareth. He sees the disparities of the Roman Empire being repeated in America under the banner of Make America Great Again. For Wallace the time for the followers of Jesus to publicly protest is at hand. Protest marches against injustice are a part of our Jesus tradition.

In our America, protest marches have been used effectively to bring about

change. The American master of the protest march was Martin Luther King Jr. When he led marches, he was using the tool of Jesus, the protest march. Many Christians kept advising King to back off from his protest marches. He kept on marching. His "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is one of the truly great literary pieces of our history. It was addressed to the clergy of Birmingham. Protest marches are unsettling to the majority. They produce consequences that are not comfortable for the protesters. King was in a jail in Birmingham because of his non-violent protest marching. Jesus was killed because he protested.

Jim Wallace has been arrested and jailed 23 times because of his protests against injustice.

The tradition of celebrating Palm Sunday as a triumphal entry should cease. It needs to be replaced with protest marches against the abuse of power and injustice in all its forms. It is the message of Palm Sunday.

The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in Palmer, Alaska. His email address is hdbss@mtaonline.net.

Senate Votes to Continue Yemen Devastation

On Tuesday, the Senate voted down a resolution that would have withdrawn US support for the Saudi-led war on Yemen, choosing instead to continue to illegally assist what the UN has called "the world's largest humanitarian crisis," reports Dennis J. Bernstein and Shireen Al-Adeimi in this interview.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Shireen Al-Adeimi is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University. But she is having a hard time focusing on her studies, when friends and family back home in Yemen are under violent attack by the heavily armed, US-backed Saudi forces, with many going hungry as a result of the Saudi blockade.

Al-Adeimi said on Tuesday, March 20, "This month marks the third anniversary of the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led war on Yemen. Despite the dire humanitarian crisis, however, the United States continues to sell arms to the Saudis and provide them with military support."

Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Mike Lee (R-Ut.), and Chris Murphy (D-Ct.) had introduced a bill that aimed to force a withdrawal of the United States from the

Saudi-led war, based on violations of the War Powers Act. But the Bill, Senate Joint Resolution 54, cosponsored by 10 senators, was voted down 55-44 on Tuesday.

Of course it was no surprise, given the amount of lobbying money spent by the Saudis to buy congressional silence and support. The bill also was met with fierce opposition by various Trump administration officials.

The American Conservative Magazine reported that “the media has been laying out the red carpet for Crown Prince bin Salman in Washington. What the establishment press won’t tell you is that no less than 25 American lobbying firms worked for the Saudi Arabian government in 2017 to the tune of \$16 million, to burnish their image, manage the message, and get massive military contracts for the weapons of war that are now being used to kill, maim and slowly starve millions of civilians in Yemen today.”

I spoke with Shireen Al-Adeimi on Tuesday, March 20, directly following the vote by Congress to continue aid for the US-supported, Saudi-led slaughter.

Dennis Bernstein: Shireen, what is your response to the Senate voting to continue aid to the Saudis?

Shireen Al-Adeimi: It is very disappointing because it ensures that millions more Yemenis will continue to suffer. On average, 130 children die every day in Yemen due to malnutrition and disease caused by the Saudi-led blockade. Many more will die because of US bombs which are dropped from Saudi jets. People continue to die for no reason at all.

DB: Could you give us a little background?

SAA: The Saudis began bombing Yemen in March, 2015. Right now, some 80% of a population of 24 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid. Yemen is experiencing the world’s worst cholera outbreak in modern history, with over 1 million cases. There is a severe water crisis affecting 15 million people in Yemen.

Hundreds of thousands have died of malnutrition and disease because Saudi Arabia is not only bombing Yemen but is also blockading Yemen by land, sea and air, ensuring that no aid or medicine can come into the country. The Saudis have created what the UN calls “the worst humanitarian crisis on earth today.”

DB: Could you describe the United States’ role in all of this?

SAA: In January, the US Army published an article detailing their support for the Saudis, including training Saudi soldiers, advising military personnel,

maintaining and upgrading vehicles and aircraft, providing courses on communication and navigation, and providing Saudi jets with mid-air refueling. This is in addition to the billions in weapon sales between the US and Saudi Arabia every year.

The bottom line is that the United States is benefiting from this relationship with the Saudis and it doesn't seem to matter that this has caused such a humanitarian toll in the process. Estimates are that over 75% of the targets in Yemen have been civilian targets.

DB: Is there a notable difference between the policies of the last administration and those of the Trump administration?

SAA: Absolutely not. This began under the Obama administration, which sold billions in weapons to the Saudis and provided them with the logistical services I just mentioned. The Trump policy in Yemen is basically on autopilot, following blindly what the Obama administration did. This is very much a bipartisan effort.

DB: Tell us more about how this is evolving on the ground.

SAA: People have lost their jobs. There is no future to look forward to. People who were once wealthy or middle-class are now resorting to begging on the streets and selling their possessions. Three million are displaced internally because there is nowhere to go with the blockade in place. People can't find water, they can't find food, they can't find medicine or fuel. They can't decide whether to take a sick child to the hospital or provide them with food. It is as bad as it can get.

DB: The Saudi prince was just in D.C. He said that he really feels for the people of Yemen and that he is working on easing the blockade because he understands how devastating it has been. What is your response to that?

SAA: It is a complete fabrication. They are the ones imposing the blockade, they are the ones bombing a sovereign country. They have no business in Yemen at all. And then to claim that it is the Houthis who are preventing food and medicine from coming into the country is completely absurd. In fact, the Saudis have acknowledged that they are using starvation as a weapon.

They have already bombed most hospitals in Yemen. Four times they bombed Doctors without Borders hospitals. So far they have caused the death of at least 10,000 civilians through airstrikes and tens of thousands more through disease and malnutrition caused by the blockade.

DB: The US media has once again dropped the ball.

SAA: MSNBC reported on Yemen once in 2017 and not once since then. There is no reporting on the humanitarian crisis, on the resolutions before Congress. When it comes to the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia, people just don't want to go there.

DB: What are human rights organizations saying about the potential for famine?

SAA: The UN has designated Yemen a level 3 for famine out of a range of 1 to 4, but when you have people already dying of starvation it doesn't matter much what level they establish. In 2015, 15,000 children died of hunger and disease in Yemen and a similar number in 2016. We are not at the brink of famine, we are already there. People are dying of starvation every day.

DB: Is it possible to get through to folks on the ground there? Is there outreach from the country for support?

SAA: Organizations such as Oxfam and Save the Children do have their ships there and they do bring in aid and food to the 7 million people who depend on it every day. But even that flow is obstructed by the Saudis. The cost of fuel has increased 200%. Family members like myself are sending cash, as are organizations like Doctors without Borders, to keep people employed and afloat. Kids are dying of diseases that are completely preventable. No one has to die from cholera.

DB: How do you explain these congress people who support this ongoing war and famine in Yemen? Are they owned by the weapons manufacturers?

SAA: Some claim that it protects Saudi interests and prevents Iran from spreading its tentacles in the region. But they undoubtedly have contact to the Saudis and to the weapons manufacturers who want to maintain their interests in Saudi Arabia.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
