

Response to Alain Epp Weaver, “Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine”

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Summary

In his essay, “Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine,” Alain Epp Weaver addresses what is perhaps the most perduring and pressing question for Palestinians and Israelis: Is coexistence among Jews and Arabs possible? Is it even imaginable? Epp Weaver answers affirmatively. Against the prevailing nationalist “cartographies” predicated on “purified” spaces, Epp Weaver suggests an alternative mapping of territory and belonging drawn from the autobiographical and theological reflections of Elias Chacour, a Palestinian citizen of Israel and Greek Catholic Archbishop of `Akka, Haifa, Nazareth, and All of Galilee. Pivotal to Chacour’s thinking is the image of the fig tree his father had planted, under which Chacour played as a child before the establishment of Israel in the War of 1948. The war and its aftermath, known among Palestinians as *al-Nakba* (“the calamity”), resulted in the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their ancestral homes and the demolition of hundreds of Arab villages and towns as part of a concerted campaign, “Plan Dalet,” to ethnically cleanse areas in which Palestinians had been the prior occupants.<sup>1</sup> Chacour describes the impact of these events on his family. Israeli soldiers expelled him, his parents, and siblings along with all of their neighbors and then razed their village to the ground. The Israeli government then prevented the dispossessed residents from returning and rebuilding. Instead, it funded the construction of Jewish colonies, *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, on the village land. In subsequent years, Israeli archaeologists would rehabilitate the remains of a Roman-era synagogue (second or third century) next to the ruined village. The site has

since been designated a national park and serves, as such, to efface from public memory the existence of the destroyed village. The park thus completes at the symbolic level the process of physical colonization begun with the original forcible expulsion of the former Arab inhabitants.

Within this context of colonialist erasure and re-signification, Chacour's reflections serve as a counter-hegemonic retrieval of a suppressed "lieu de mémoire." As he unfolds his reflections, the image of his father's fig tree becomes a way of talking about the continuing sense of connection among exiled Palestinians to the land and their destroyed homes. It returns Palestinians to a space that, in Zionist imaginings, becomes an empty, desolate expanse awaiting a landless, but enterprising people.

But, is Chacour's reassertion of Palestinian rootedness merely the inverse reflection of the Zionist myth of abandonment and vacancy? Is Chacour implying that Palestinian existence necessitates a reversal of history that would clear the land and again make it vacant, this time for a Palestinian return and resettlement? Israeli analysts like Meron Benvenisiti and Shaul Cohen make this argument forcefully when they discuss Palestinian attempts to create cartographies that restore their erased presences. Both men remain pessimistic about the possibilities of co-existence precisely because their observations have led them to conclude that there is no exit from this hall of mirrors in which Israeli and Palestinians conceptions reflect but never engage each other's mutually exclusive presuppositions and claims. Other social scientists, too, are equally critical of these exclusionary nationalisms, arguing that their "zero-sum" equations ignore the reality of overlapping, heterogeneous spaces in Palestine/Israel. What is lacking, they say, is any imagined sense of mutual belonging that emerges organically from, and

reflects, this heterogeneity. At this point, Epp Weaver intervenes, inviting us to listen more carefully to what Chacour is saying. He claims, contrary to the pessimism of established social science wisdom, that the theological imaginings of Chacour lead him to discover an alternative future, one very much at odds with the dominant forms of exclusionary nationalism. For, even as his “arboreal imagination,” his metaphor of the fig tree, challenges Israeli-Zionist claims about a desolate landscape waiting for Jewish settlement, it does so in a way that contests all forms of exclusion by emphasizing belonging as a process of grafting of diverse species into a single, living being. Palestinian Arab “lives were bound together with the other people who inhabited Palestine—the Jews” just as, following Paul in Ephesians, Galatians 3:28-29, and Romans 9-11, “we Gentiles had been ‘grafted in’ among God’s chosen people of faith, just as Father had grafted six different kinds of fig trees together to make a delightful new tree” (12). The grafting in, in Epp Weaver’s reading of Chacour, occurs not at the expense of the Jews—the election is not cancelled as such—but rather results in a new, stronger tree, one that incorporates the Other, “the foreigner,” into the promise made to Abraham. Chacour thus “affirms Jewish rootedness in the land” even as he restores Palestinians to their fig and olive groves. From such imaginings comes “a theo-political vision of common belonging in the land” (14). The Palestinian call for return and restoration (*al-`awda*), thus, need not be heard as a demand for Israel’s erasure but rather for a grafting in that will result in a new, bi-national entity, one that reflects the actual existing ethnic-national heterogeneity of Palestine-Israel.

### Response

In reading Epp Weaver's presentation of Archbishop Chacour's political theology, I am struck instantly by the fact that it arises from the margins in at least two ways. First, as theology, it constitutes a marginal discourse within the hierarchy of knowledge that now prevails within the academy. Yet, because it is on the margins, it is able to challenge the canons of value-neutrality that require the suspension of the normative. Scientific methods can uncover the contradictions inherent in exclusivist nationalisms that seek to impose purified zones on ethnically heterogeneous spaces. But can social science propose a way through those contradictions? Is it permissible to proceed from description to prescription? Can one take sides and still claim to be doing "science"? Theology seems less burdened by such anxieties. It has no compunction to rein in normative judgments. Indeed, the normative is the starting point.

The second way in which Chacour's political theology is marginal has to do with his identity as a Christian. Within Palestinian society as a whole—dispersed and fractured as that whole currently is—Christians comprise a progressively shrinking minority relative to the much larger Muslim population. Estimating generously, Christians constitute a mere 2% of the Palestinian population in Israel, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The percentage increases if one limits the sample to Israel, alone. Still, relative to Palestinian Muslims, and certainly to Jewish Israelis, the Christians form a quite small group. Yet, it is from this margin that a generative vision, as embodied in Chacour's thoughts and those of other Christian theologians, emerges of a cross-ethnic, cross-national collective. I am reminded here of Victor Turner's reference to Iowan Lewis' idea of "the power of the weak." Marginal groups, groups that are liminal in the sense of being "betwixt and between," in Turner's examples, conquered autochthonous

peoples, are also groups associated with certain ritual powers and “with the total community seen as undifferentiated.” Such groups play an important role in the “pedagogics of liminality” through which chiefs are formed and educated into the moral constraints and responsibilities of leadership. The conquered, lesser group, in its function as “total community,” exercises authority over the chief-to-be in these initiation and installation processes. Proper leadership requires that the chief remember, be educated into the fact, that it is the community that has empowered him. Turner also points out how structurally subordinate groups can function, again in the sense of representing “the total community,” as “upholders of religious and moral values, such as the Hebrews in the ancient Near East, the Irish in early medieval Christendom, and the Swiss in modern Europe.” This function has its reflection in the mythic figures of literature—“the Jewish fiddler Rothchild in Chekhov’s tale, ‘Rothchild’s Fiddle,’ Mark Twain’s fugitive Negro slave Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, ...”—who, though in a position of structural inferiority, nevertheless express universal human values in the sense of “what Henri Bergson would have called ‘open’ as against ‘closed morality,’ the latter being essentially the normative system of bounded, structured, particularistic groups.”<sup>ii</sup>

Chacour’s theological narrative, coming as it does from a position of subordination and thus liminality, becomes in Turner’s terms an example of “open morality,” that is to say, a reassertion of the universal, of *communitas*. As such it cuts across the ethno-national boundaries that undergird Jewish-Israeli exclusivity, privilege, and power. The “total community seen as undifferentiated” contains more than just Jews; continued exclusion and suppression of non-Jewish others can only come at great cost, not only to these repressed others, who suffer most directly, but also to the very legitimacy of Israel itself

as a nation that claims to be a democracy committed to transcendent human rights. Judaism, too, must suffer, at least that Judaism which gestures beyond narrow ethnic solidarities, even while affirming the particularity of Jewish memory and practice. But Chacour's "arboreal imagination" has implications, too, for Palestinian nationalism and Islam. Arab Christians are as much a minority within the wider Palestinian society as they are within Israel. To imagine Palestinians as grafted into the same communal tree as Israelis is also to call into question fantasies of revenge and revolutionary inversion born of defeat and the *ressentiment* it instills in the hearts of the conquered. The specifically Israeli fear that Palestinian calls for return and restitution amount to demands for a reverse ethnic cleansing that would restore Arabs again to a dominant status are not entirely unfounded. Human history furnishes multiple examples of deeply divided societies in which contending groups that have failed to establish a workable schism engage in violent attempts to eradicate the Other, defined as inassimilable "matter out of place," and thereby restore an undivided whole.<sup>iii</sup> The fantasy of a cleansed, restored space exists as much among Palestinian nationalists as it does among Zionists. Most recently such imaginings have taken the form of religious conceptions that define Palestine as an inalienable Islamic *waqf*. Granted, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which increasingly has emerged as the dominant political force in Palestinian society, has evolved in its positions, so that now it speaks of a long-term truce with Israel—at least, that is, until Israel's devastating three-week bombardment and invasion of the Gaza Strip in December 2008-January 2009. But, the vision of "Muslim Palestine" remains deeply embedded within the movement and taps into powerful feelings of violation and usurpation and concomitant desire for revenge and restitution. Chacour's

imagery of Jews and Arabs as grafted into a single living tree challenges such exclusivist imaginings in which Muslims are dominant and at best “tolerate” Jews and Christians as *ahl al-dhimma* (subordinate non-Muslim others who pay tribute in exchange for toleration and protection). In Chacour’s “arboreal” imagery, no one community can command pride of place precisely because the whole depends for its survival on the interweaving and blending and overlapping and integrating of communities within a profoundly heterogeneous space.

In the end, Chacour’s alternative imagining may well remain consigned to the deepest of margins, to irrelevance. Those most interested in Chacour are individuals like Epp Weaver, foreign outsiders whose admirable sympathies lie with those Palestinian Christians and others who resist exclusive ethno-nationalisms and instead advocate bi-national conceptions of belonging. To what extent are the majority of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims, and Christians who are committed to exclusive nationalisms, listening in on the conversations occurring among Christian theologians like Chacour? Chacour, a member of a religious community that is declining rapidly in significance, demographically and politically, is a minority within a minority. He might be receiving a hearing among certain Christian communities in Europe and the United States, but does his voice rise much above a whisper where it really counts, in Israel and Occupied Palestine?<sup>iv</sup> Epp Weaver and others like him can perhaps amplify voices like Chacour’s somewhat, at least they can do so in Western intellectual circles or within U.S. and European churches. Given the impact of Christian Zionism among Western Protestants, particularly, the effort to make Palestinian Christian voices heard among Christian communities abroad is of great significance. Epp Weaver and others like him

can also help link the concerns of Palestinian Christians like Chacour with the efforts of other groups committed to forging an alternative bi-national future. Such groups include Badil (an Arabic term meaning, “Alternative”) and Zochrot (Hebrew for “Remembering”). Badil advocates for Palestinian refugee rights and return while Zochrot promotes remembrance of the *Nakba* (the 1948 Palestinian “calamity”) as a first step toward inter-communal reconciliation and coexistence. These are secular organizations that bring together individuals of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian background. They are also, like Chacour, politically marginal. Yet, in preserving and embodying “the total community seen as undifferentiated” and the universal values it stands for, these groups along with Christian voices like Chacour’s, serve as witnesses to an alternative vision of integration, acceptance of difference, and mutual respect and coexistence within a single collectivity. Historical circumstances can shift quickly, creating new opportunities for such alternatives to suddenly become viable and necessary. The challenge is actively to foster the emergence of these conditions even when they seem the furthest removed from realization.

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<sup>i</sup> Walid Khalidi, “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1, Special Issue: Palestine 1948 (Autumn, 1988): 4-33.

<sup>ii</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 99-100, 109-110.

<sup>iii</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 89-102.

<sup>iv</sup> Historically, of course, Palestinian Christians have played a very important role in the articulation of a multi-sectarian secular nationalism. It remains to be seen whether or not this tradition of nationalism, which did ultimately come to embrace the notion of Israeli-Palestinian coexistence, principally in the form of a two-state solution, will survive. At present, the Palestinians are deeply divided amongst themselves, with Hamas controlling the Gaza Strip and

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making significant inroads into traditionally secular-nationalist strongholds in the West Bank. This fact, combined with the ever expanding and solidifying Jewish-Israeli colonization of the West Bank and the sharp demographic decline of the Palestinian Christian community, has led to profound anxiety and even pessimism among Christians about the prospects for a two-state solution and the formation of a secular democratic Palestinian state. For more on these issues, see my article, "For Church or Nation? Islamism, Secular-Nationalism, and the Transformation of Christian Identities in Palestine," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 777-813.