

Some Methodists Are on a Mission To Demonize Israel

Opinion

Yitzhak Santis | Wed. Aug 22, 2007

Critique of Women's Division 2007/2008 Mission Study: *Israel-Palestine*, by Stephen Goldstein

In 2004, the United Methodist Church passed a resolution calling for “members of each congregation to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from all perspectives.” The call for impartiality by the largest mainline Protestant church in the United States was a laudable one, but it has since become clear that for some Methodists fair-mindedness is not on the agenda.

Within the church there are various bodies that address specific subjects of concern to the whole denomination. One of these, the General Board of Global Ministries, embarked on a yearlong, church-wide “mission study” program on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To date the perspective presented by the program has been so predominantly Palestinian, and the effort to vilify Israel so transparent, that one can only conclude there is a campaign underway to persuade Methodists to support divestment at the denomination's quadrennial General Conference next year.

The centerpiece of the mission study is a slick 220-page volume written by Reverend Stephen Goldstein. The book, which is published by the Women's Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, is available for purchase on the United Methodist Church's official Web site.

The pattern of presenting biased opinions against Israel repeats itself over and over again in the mission study — as it does in the resources and links offered on the Web site of the General Board of Global Ministries.

Take, for example, the mission study's bibliography, which is available for downloading from the board's Web site. The first item listed is an article titled “Remember the Liberty.” Published by a group called Americans for Middle East Understanding, the article claims Israel deliberately attacked an American Navy ship during the Six-Day War in 1967. No countervailing view is included.

Indeed, in his book Goldstein describes the incident as having been “covered up for 30 years.” To get what he calls the “full story,” Goldstein directs readers to none other than the Web site of Americans for Middle East Understanding.

In both the bibliography and the book itself, some of Israel's harshest critics — including Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, George Ball, Robert Fisk and Ilan Pappé — are given overwhelming representation. And the bibliography's list of recommended videos, available from Americans for Middle East Understanding, feature titles like “Children of the Nakba,” “Palestine is Still the Issue” and “Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land.”

One section of the bibliography is titled “Jewish Religious Fundamentalism and the Place of Religion in Judaism and Israeli Society.” No comparable section addressing Islamic religious

fundamentalism in Arab societies — let alone the role of radical Islamists in fomenting terrorism — is to be found.

Mission study participants are directed to download photos from the United Methodist Church's Web site. The photos of Israelis focus on soldiers, tanks and the "wall." The photos of Palestinians feature hugging children, a woman sewing and men smiling.

Absent from the Web site are photos showing the effects of Palestinian terrorist bombings on Israeli civilians. The message is clear.

Meanwhile, Goldstein's narrative is plagued by severe factual errors. For instance, it describes "Baruch Goldstein's assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in February 1994." Rabin was shot by Yigal Amir in November 1995.

The mission study takes the view that Israel and Zionism are mostly at fault for the elusiveness of peace. It assumes the mantle of psychoanalyzing an entire society, and its tone and tenor are suffused with hostility and group stereotyping.

One example: "To this day there is a latent hysteria in Israeli life that springs directly from [the Holocaust]. It explains the paranoiac sense of isolation that has been a main characteristic of the Israeli temper since 1948.... And it has been the single most significant factor in Israel's unwillingness to trust their Arab neighbors or the Palestinians.... Since 1948 the Holocaust and the fear of antisemitism have also created a consciousness that has contributed significantly to preventing Israel from making peace with its Arab neighbors."

Or another: "The viewpoint of the early settlers was that of Western European colonialists. Today we would surely judge that outlook as basically racist, and it still is." As proof of this assertion, Goldstein quotes at length the infamous "Zionism is Racism" 1975 resolution passed by the United Nations in 1975 and rescinded in 1991.

The study guide's overall effect is to demonize Israel and those who support it. It is filled with glaring omissions, outright factual errors, misinformation and half-truths.

For example, Goldstein distorts a quote by David Ben-Gurion to supposedly prove that expelling Palestinians was always part of a Zionist master plan. In 1937 Gurion wrote a letter to his son Amos. Goldstein describes the letter as follows: "[Ben-Gurion] had written that if the Palestinians could not be removed from the country by negotiations, then 'we will expel the Arabs and take their place.'"

In fact, Ben-Gurion wrote exactly the opposite: "We do not wish and do not need to expel Arabs and take their place." Had Goldstein done his homework, he would also have read in the same Ben-Gurion letter, "All our aspiration is built on the assumption — proven throughout all our activity in the Land — that there is enough room in the country for ourselves and the Arabs."

Goldstein gives scant attention to Palestinian terrorism, while condemning the security barrier that has reduced Israeli deaths by terrorism from dozens each month to practically none. He takes

Yasser Arafat's side in the failure of Oslo at Camp David. He sympathetically discusses Palestinian refugees, but never mentions that hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to flee Arab countries as refugees.

For Goldstein, it seems, Israel is solely responsible for the Palestinians' circumstances, while Palestinians have no active role in this conflict. Palestinians, he appears to suggest, are only victims. He patronizes them by giving their leadership, which has failed the Palestinians time and again, a free pass. And, he discounts the considerable role played by others in the region.

What can explain such deliberate distortion? Perhaps Goldstein's own words give a strong clue.

In the study guide's opening pages he includes an in-depth personal history, in which he shares his story of alienation from Judaism and conversion to Christianity. Raised a Jew in Brooklyn and New Jersey, he speaks of managing "to get myself expelled from Hebrew school" and walking "away from my bar mitzvah." He describes himself in high school as "attempting to deny being Jewish. If I were an adult, I would have been labeled a self-hating Jew."

That an important mainline Protestant denomination such as the United Methodist Church is promoting this distorted and inaccurate program reopens a troubling set of issues in Christian-Jewish relations. We must frankly ask the Methodist church's leadership how a yearlong study that is so flagrantly insensitive and biased could have been allowed to get past a first edit — let alone endorsed, implemented and distributed.

With divestment resolutions already emerging from several regional Methodist conferences, it is difficult not to view this mission study as an effort to ensure that if, as expected, divestment is voted on at the church's national conference next May, delegates will have been prepared to cast their votes correctly.

Under these circumstances, the Methodist leadership should now engage seriously with the Jewish community, which overwhelmingly opposes divestment from left to right. Such engagement, if it leads to a truly fair presentation of the issues, could prevent a major setback in interfaith relations.

But talk is not enough. It would be an appropriate first step for the United Methodist Church to immediately suspend this flawed and fraudulent study mission, and restart it only after a serious review of the process has taken place. The church needs to ensure that materials representing a broad spectrum of mainstream Israeli and American Jewish perspectives are fully allowed into the discussion. Not only would this be in line with the church's own policy of studying the issue "from all perspectives," but it would support, rather than erode, the recent decades of Jewish-Christian rapprochement.

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