

Palestinian Evangelicals – a Theologically Engaged Anthropological Approach

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Abstract:

Christian theologians have grappled for centuries with the fact that they are not Jews, yet embedded in Jewish history. Situated in the context of a Jewish-centric State that has been welcomed by a majority of evangelicals worldwide as fulfilment of biblical prophecy (and supported by their financial, spiritual, and political investment), Palestinian evangelicals are an anomaly. While they share an evangelical commitment, they have a complex and difficult relationship with the Israeli state. This paper argues that the population of Palestinian evangelicals is most productively explored through a combined interdisciplinary approach of Theology and Anthropology: it reveals the historical theologies that have shaped Palestinian evangelical engagement with the Israeli state and their global faith family. The article argues that theologically engaged Anthropology can aid in uncovering the power relationships within a transnational religious movement.

Keywords: Israel-Palestine, evangelicalism, theology, power, citizenship

‘As a Palestinian Christian pastor and long-time peace activist, I have a confession to make: I’m guilty of despair.’ These upsetting words stem from a blog post by Revd. Alex Awad (2018), one of the first Palestinian evangelicals I spoke to when I started the research on which this article is based. I had arranged a meeting with him during a conference organised by the Palestinian Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem, which challenged Christian Zionism¹ and was aimed at Western evangelicals. Even at that point, in 2014, there was a great urgency among Palestinian evangelicals to communicate their difficult social and political realities, and to develop a less Israel-centred evangelical theology than is popular among evangelicals worldwide. Yet, today the prospects for a fair solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict seem even further beyond reach, or, as Awad wrote: ‘then came Donald Trump.’

Awad’s cry of despair in the blog post quoted above was a response to the US government’s announcement to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Landler, 2017). This symbolic move, scheduled for 14th May 2018, the day commemorating seventy years since the founding of Israel and the Palestinian *Nakba* (lit. ‘catastrophe’),² reversed seven decades of US foreign policy. The US embassy move openly ignored the international law that protects the sensitive status quo of Jerusalem, a city of central importance to the three world religions Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The day of the embassy move itself turned into one of the bloodiest days in Gaza since the 2014 Israel-Gaza war, as 52 protesters were killed and hundreds injured by Israeli soldiers (Holpuch & Weaver, 2018).

Awad’s despair regarding this destabilising move, however, lay not just in the embassy move and what it represented in itself. Rather, it was grounded in the sense of being betrayed by a large proportion of his fellow evangelicals in the United States. Trump’s revised Jerusalem policy was in large part due to the political pressure of American conservative evangelicals, who also form one of his significant voter demographics (Martí, 2018; Oliphant &

¹ A theology that considers the founding of the State of Israel a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, considers it as divinely ordained for Jews, and leads to financial, political, and spiritual investment in the Israeli state.

² The events around the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 are variously referred to as *War of Independence* (by Israel’s Jewish citizens) and *Al-Nakba* by Palestinians. What was a triumphant event for many Jews (and also for many evangelicals) led to devastating loss of lives and land of Palestinians. Ca. 800,000 Palestinians were displaced as a result of the war, leading to one of the oldest and largest ongoing refugee crises. Today there are ca 4.3 million Palestinian refugees registered with the United Nations as a direct result of their or their families’ displacement in 1948. The ‘new’ Israeli historians offer a critical account of the events of 1948 and their consequences, see for example Pappé, 1994; Shlaim, 1998, 2004, Morris, 2004, 2008. Acclaimed Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi (2007) provides a Palestinian perspective on the same events.

Whitesides, 2017). The opening ceremony in Jerusalem itself was framed by a public prayer by the pastor of the First Baptist Church Dallas, Revd. Robert Jeffress. His prayer clearly illustrated the belief of many evangelicals that Jerusalem is Jewish Israel's capital, divinely ordained by God three thousand years ago – and that Trump is believed to be 'God's tool' in the unfolding of salvation history.³ Further, it illustrated the belief that the State of Israel itself is considered a fulfilment of biblical prophecy by many evangelicals, and a return of the Jews to its territory a sign that the end-times will be unfolding soon. Ironically, it was Revd. Robert Jeffress' predecessor and pastor of the First Baptist Church Dallas, Revd George Truett, who was instrumental in the conversion of the first Palestinian evangelical Christian, and later responsible for the raising of funds for the first Baptist Church built in Nazareth, Israel. Thus, while the alliance between US evangelical leaders and Israel is long-standing (Wagner, 1995), the American evangelical endorsement of the embassy move has thwarted the hopes of Palestinian evangelicals Awad and his colleagues that a theological and political change among US evangelicals was imminent.

The small minority of ca. 5,000 Palestinian evangelicals have a – to put it mildly – difficult relationship to their global evangelical faith family and the Israeli state. Christian theologians have grappled for centuries with the fact that they are not Jews, yet embedded in Jewish history. Naturally, different theories have been developed as to the Christian relationship to Israel and Judaism. The most pertinent and geopolitically significant one today is that of Christian Zionism, which can be considered a politically active form of Dispensationalism (cf. Durbin, 2018; Smith, 2013; Smith & Gunner, 2014). The latter is a form of evangelicalism that was developed by Lord John Nelson Darby in 19th century Britain, and popularised both by the Scofield Reference Bible in the wider Anglophone world, including North America (Smith, 2013). It neatly divided world history into seven 'dispensations', the current one being the penultimate one before the second coming of Christ and the end times. Due to its all-encompassing narrative of human history and typological theology, Crapanzano (2000: 175) calls Dispensationalism 'a philosophy of history'. Although dispensationalist or Christian Zionist theologies are often only ever implicit in any given congregation, and are far from monolithic (Durbin, 2018), a 2013 Pew Study⁴ suggests that 82% of white American evangelicals believe that Israel has been given to the Jews. American Christian Zionists today

³ See the full video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cFVZxkoF4No> [accessed 07/09/2018].

⁴ See: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/03/more-white-evangelicals-than-american-jews-say-god-gave-israel-to-the-jewish-people/> [accessed 21/02/2017]

are organised in the organisation *Christians United for Israel* (CUFI), which numbers 4.1 million evangelicals among its members. Further, the *International Christian Embassy* in Jerusalem (ICEJ) is a contact point for Christian Zionists from all over the world. Ironically but perhaps tellingly, the ICEJ has its headquarters in the former family home of the well-known Palestinian literary scholar and cultural critic Edward Said, which he and his family fled in 1948 (Wagner, 1995).

When I began the research on which this article is based, I assumed that most Palestinian evangelicals were activists like Awad, eager to call their existence to the minds of their global evangelical faith family, and challenge their largely uncritical engagement with Israel. Yet, as my work progressed, I realised that many Palestinian evangelicals, especially in Israel proper, but also to some degree in the West Bank (cf. Sturm & Frantzman, 2014), in fact share dispensational and even Christian Zionist beliefs. Only a very small minority of Palestinian evangelicals even feel comfortable to ‘talk about politics’ and critically engage with the Israeli state. In this article, I explore how a theologically engaged anthropological approach can shed light on the reason for this somewhat uncomfortable silence.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how a theologically engaged anthropology can reveal the distinct power dynamics within a transnational religious movement: in the present example, it reveals Palestinian evangelicals’ ambiguous and complex belonging to both the Israeli state and global evangelicalism. In previous work on theologically engaged anthropology, Jon Bialecki (2018) stipulated that a good starting point for this kind of interdisciplinary engagement is a shared ‘problematic’. In a volume dedicated to theologically engaged Anthropology, edited by Derick Lemons, Bialecki demonstrated this through the example of ‘human flourishing’ (James Bielo’s example for a shared problematic in the same volume is ‘critique’). Taking inspiration from this approach, for the purpose of this article I focus on ‘citizenship’ as ‘shared problematic’, specifically at the example of a strike of the Christian schools in 2015. This example will help to explore the power dynamics at play within global evangelicalism.

From an anthropological perspective, the notion of citizenship opens up discussions regarding political subject formation (e.g. Ong et al., 1996), membership and belonging, the ethics and values associated with the delineation of a community (at different levels from state, region, city, to cultural membership), and its processes of inclusion and exclusion: it one way in which the ‘social’ becomes visible. From a theological perspective, a Christian’s

understanding of citizenship is reflective of their understanding of their own God-given place in the world, influenced by their Christian subject-making: Naomi Haynes defines theology as ‘a particular kind of reflexive action aimed at understanding who God is, how he works in the world, how people ought to relate to God, and what they can expect from him’ (Haynes, forthcoming). In light of the above, I suggest that a further dimension of theology is that it also aims at understanding how believers ought to relate to the world around them. This means that believers’ understanding of how God works in the world also shapes their understanding of their own role in the world, including their notions of citizenship and politics. This article shows how Palestinian evangelicals are still deeply influenced in their notion of citizenship by the apolitical dispensationalist theologies of their church founders, yet are also developing ways to resist and transform these in specific situations such as the school strike introduced below.

Christian citizenship is not a new theme in anthropological research of Christians in itself – it features in a number of ethnographies of Christianity (Bialecki, 2009b, 2017; Daswani, 2015; O’Neill, 2009, 2015). For example, Bialecki emphasises how Christian temporalities determine the possibility for social and political action, demonstrating that even among more ‘progressive’ believers this action is curtailed by an understanding of God as ultimately sovereign. O’Neill highlights that Christians’ political action can and must be understood from a different perspective of viewing the world (O’Neill, 2015). He argues that ‘prayer for the nation’ can foster a certain sense of self that does have an impact on society, even if not in the citizenship sense of a secular liberal Western framework (O’Neill 2009: 12). As we will see, both of these theorisations come to bear on the contexts of Palestinian evangelicals. However, the challenge of appropriate Christian citizenship is amplified in my ethnographic context because the social and political engagements of those I worked with are not merely expressive of a particular theological stance in general, but are seen by many co-evangelicals as potentially directly impacting eschatological scenarios. The question of citizenship acquires significant weight when one is a citizen in the country of God’s ‘chosen people’, and one ethnically or politically at odds with its Jewish character. Palestinian Christians in Israel-Palestine live out their faith in the centre of the Christian spiritual cartography (Coleman, 2013), in a landscape and among a people that are often spiritualised and used as example of how God acts in the world (Durbin, 2014, 2018). The example of the school strike below shows how both secular liberal and theological notions of citizenship interact, and how a joint

theological and anthropological understanding is necessary to interpret it in all its nuance and complexity.

To explore this, I proceed as follows: firstly, I show how a theologically engaged anthropological approach enables the researcher to position those they work with as part of a transnational 'interpretative community'. One of the contributions of my work on Palestinian evangelicalism is to see Palestinian evangelicals not just in relation to the Israeli state, as many of the previous scholars of Palestinian Christianity (e.g. Bowman, 2011; Kårtveit, 2013a; L D Lybarger, 2005; Loren D. Lybarger, 2007) have done, but also in a meaningful relationship to their wider faith community. This lens reveals the power dynamics within it. Secondly, I demonstrate the benefit of engaging with theology not just in order to understand contemporary theological negotiations across difference, but also in order to explore how current theological positions have developed over time: a *longue durée* perspective of historical theology allows us to contextualise those we work with within a theological tradition that has developed over centuries. In this example, the anomalous population of Palestinian evangelicals render visible the social and cultural factors that have shaped evangelical theology regarding Israel, as well as the broader faith aspects it points to: these include believers' understanding of biblical scripture, of salvation, of eschatology, and of the Kingdom of God, which impact contemporary evangelical notions of citizenship and politics.

Through these elaborations, this essay argues that a theologically engaged anthropology can reveal the complex power dynamics that influence and shape Christian communities in a more holistic way than previously achieved. I examined elsewhere how powerful Western evangelical actors are able to shape imaginations of Israel (Rose 2018), as well as the processes through which theological orthodoxy is negotiated and performed on the territory itself (Rose, forthcoming). In this article, I want to add to the emerging work in theologically engaged anthropology by focussing specifically on how the methodological lens of theologically engaged anthropology has made these insights possible in the first place. In order to illustrate these points, let me begin by recounting the astonishing strike of the Christian schools in Israel-Palestine in 2015.

[The strike of the Christian schools in 2015](#)

One of the most influential activities of the American Southern Baptist missionaries to Israel was the founding of the first and only evangelical private school in Nazareth, Northern Israel,

in 1937. Dispensationalist American forms of evangelicalism had been introduced to what is today Israel-Palestine in 1911 through a Palestinian (originally Roman Catholic) Christian called Musa Shukry, who had converted to Southern Baptism during his stay in the United States. He was ordained as a minister in the United States and founded the first Baptist church in Nazareth on his return. In the 1920s, American missionaries joined Musa and developed the Baptist ministry in Mandatory Palestine (Ajaj et al., 2016: 56). They reached out to Muslim and Christian Palestinians, considering Palestinian Christians of established denominations (Roman and Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, etc.) as ‘non-believers’ and necessary to be converted to the evangelical faith (Rowden, 2010). The school became an important tool in these outreach activities, and was further established following the war surrounding the founding of the Israeli state after 1948. Most of today’s Palestinian Israeli evangelical adults have attended the Nazareth Baptist School and its associated programmes, such as summer camps. Most of them made the decision to follow Jesus mentored by Western evangelical dispensationalists associated with the school (cf. Mansour, 2011).

There are now ca. 35 evangelical congregations in Israel-Palestine, though none of them exceeds 100 members. While formally independent, there still is ample exchange between Palestinian evangelicals and Western evangelical partners and visitors to Israel-Palestine. Rarely a week goes by without the presence of a visiting tour group in Palestinian evangelical church services (usually from North America or Europe). Moreover, through the consumption of widely available Christian media originating mostly in the Anglophone world (Ingalls, 2016), as well as connections to their Southern Baptist founding organisations or associations like the World Evangelical Alliance, Palestinian evangelicals participate in a ‘global’ faith community (Coleman, 2013; Hancock, 2014; Oosterbaan, 2011; Rose, 2018; Schöler, 2008).

The school continues to have a significant influence on Palestinian evangelicalism. It currently counts around 1,000 students from primary school to matriculation age, ca. 25% of which are Muslim, and ca. 90% of the remaining Christian students are of established denominations: with one of the highest matriculation rates of the country, the school enjoys a good reputation even outside of strictly evangelical circles. It differentiates itself from other Christian schools for example by compulsory chapel services taught by a Bible teacher, which include lively worship songs and prayer. Further, it is important for the school leadership that its teachers subscribe to an evangelical faith and maintain the school’s evangelical ethos. Until the 1990s, the school was run in close collaboration with the

organisation of its American Baptist founders. However, in the 1990s the official partnership with the American mission board of the Baptists came to an end. Since then, the school is even more reliant on the partial funding (ca. 65%) they started to receive from the Israeli government since 1987 as a ‘recognised but unofficial’ private school (the same status as ultra-Orthodox Jewish yeshiva schools). Together with the fees asked of parents and some donations by their American partner organisation, this is how the school has been funded to date.

It is for this reason that the Israeli government’s move in 2015 to cap the funding to ca. 35% for Christian schools in Israel was a critical turning point (Mansour, 2015). Notably, the government did not just cap the funding: it also prohibited the subsequent raising of the school fees, in effect making it impossible for the schools to exist any further. Beside the Nazareth Baptist School, this new regulation also affected the 46 other Christian denominational schools in Israel. This move must be seen in the context of a right-wing conservative Israeli government, which at the same time increased the funding of ultra-Orthodox yeshiva schools (of the same legal status) to 100%.

While Palestinian Israeli citizens have more rights than their co-ethnics in the occupied Palestinian territories, they do still face discrimination. As Israeli citizens, they can vote and run for political office – yet their representation in parliament remains extremely limited. They also face bureaucratic obstacles in their participation in Israeli society in areas such as education, housing, and civil rights (Monterescu, 2015; Kimmerling, 2008; Pappé, 2011). Further, in July 2018, the Israeli government passed a discriminatory ‘Jewish nationality bill’: it declares the State of Israel officially as nation-state for Jewish people, downgrades Arabic from a national language to language with ‘special status’, and makes the building of nationwide Jewish settlements a priority. Critics have condemned the bill as racist, and reminiscent of apartheid (Lis & Landau, 2018). Thus, the cutting of the school funding in 2015 for Palestinian Christian schools played into a larger agenda to disadvantage ethnic minorities in Israel, and was seen as an attempt to bring the Christian schools under full government control (by forcing them to become state schools).

Demonstrations and lobbying notwithstanding, the conflict escalated so that, at the beginning of the school year in September 2015, for the first time in their history, the private Christian schools went on strike and remained closed to their ca. 33,000 students for several weeks. Had I not have learnt that political activism is uncomfortable for most Palestinian

evangelicals, I would probably have taken the demonstrations against the funding cuts for the school as self-evident as part of a larger struggle for Palestinian rights. Furthermore, Palestinian Christians of other denominations have been politically engaged in other ways, including in pan-Arabism and the first Intifada (Bowman, 2014; Kassissieh, 2003; Lybarger, 2007). Yet, in a Palestinian evangelical milieu that remains strongly influenced by dispensationalist theology, the evangelical participation in the protests was surprising. Both the original missionaries' theological view on Israel (as being ordained by God) and their pietistic withdrawal meant that they did not encourage Palestinians' critical citizenship in the Israeli state. Many times I had been told by Palestinian evangelicals that evangelicals 'don't talk about politics', or that 'politics is filthy' (cf. Harding, 2000).

Yet, during the weeks of the strike, teachers, parents, and students from the Nazareth Baptist School took shifts in manning a protest tent in front of the local government building in Nazareth Illit, the Jewish part of Nazareth. Those who were not protesting provided protesters with meals. On one day, members of the largest evangelical church in Nazareth packed lunches for those protesting at the tent, and evangelical protesters also profited from the supplies brought by other churches and schools. Some Palestinian evangelical friends posted articles and links to petitions on Facebook, or changed their Facebook profile pictures to a black picture with the hashtag '#equality' written in English, Arab and Hebrew (including Fadi). Many also participated in the 8,000-10,000 strong protest march in Tel Aviv, which was supported by Palestinian Muslim schools in solidarity.

In their posts, blogs, and in interviews with the media, Palestinian evangelicals frequently addressed American Christians, in much stronger terms than I had previously encountered. In an English blog post published on the 'Come and See' website (a web portal for Palestinian evangelicals in Israel to report on their activities and experience), the authors lamented the non-involvement and lack of interest of American evangelicals in the issue, before issuing a direct call:

The Bible teaches us that the church in every place in the world is the body of Christ and when "one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor 12: 26). The part of the body that lives in the land that Jesus lived in is aching. This part has not been treated fairly by Israel. It has been pushed into the corner through systematic actions against its 47 schools. The Israeli government has performed severe cuts in the budgets of these schools to a point they

are not able to continue its work. So where does the Christian world stand in such moments? Does it stand with the brothers and sisters in the one body, or it turns a cold shoulder to the Arab Israeli brothers [sic.] in Christ because of who is involved in this matter-the irreproachable state of Israel that should never be criticized?⁵

The authors then urged the international readers to write to the Israeli Prime Minister, the President, and the Minister of Education, providing their respective contact details at the bottom of the post.

While the coverage of the Christian school strike remained limited in Israeli media, American news channels slowly began to pick up on the story, including USA Today. When about a month after the beginning of the protests an agreement was reached between the schools and the government, many Palestinian Christians led this success back to the pressure of American evangelicals on the Israeli government. A temporary funding agreement (the government agreed to provide 50% of the funding) meant that the schools were able to reopen at least in the short term, until a more permanent agreement could be reached. While not necessarily the outcome hoped for by the protesters, for Palestinian evangelicals it meant that their call for action had been heard. When speaking with a staff member of the Nazareth Baptist School about this, she affirmed that “the Catholics say that the American letters moved things [...] They say, it was *your men who helped!*”⁶

Palestinian evangelicals and their global faith family in the *longue durée*

I have recounted the events around the school strike in order to highlight an example of the ways in which Palestinian evangelicals navigate their belonging to both the Israeli state and to their global evangelical faith family. I will unpack in the following the insights afforded by a theologically engaged anthropological approach into the navigation of Christian and ‘worldly’ citizenship.

⁵ <http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1293> [accessed 15/10/2018]

⁶ It was known to many Palestinian Christians that Pope Francis supposedly touched on the issue in a pre-planned meeting with the Israeli President Rivlin. However, the content of this meeting remained undisclosed, and the Israeli President does not have much direct political power (as opposed to its prime minister) – the meeting did not lead to direct political outcomes. This meeting with the Pope may have had more influence on the temporary agreement than is given credit for by Palestinian Christians, though the general sense was that the American involvement led to the change in policy.

My first point deals with my conceptualisation of Palestinian evangelicals as part of a transnational faith tradition, which was enabled by my attention to their theological commitments. Here, I differ significantly from previous work on Palestinian Christianity, which considered the Christianity of those they worked with as social and cultural marker rather than ontological commitment (Lybarger, 2007; Bowman, 2011; Kårtveit, 2013, 2014). The work of these scholars is more in the tradition of earlier anthropological treatment of Christianity that saw Christianity as ‘background noise’. This is elaborated for example in Joel Robbins’ (2007) well-known critique of the otherwise astute work of Jean and John Comaroff (1991) and their study of the Tswana: in particular, Robbins points to their commitment to ‘continuity thinking’ (Robbins 2007: 10), that struggles to come to terms with ‘Christian ideas about time, change, and belief’ (Robbins 2007: 6). Notions of radical rupture in a convert’s life are difficult to grapple with amid anthropological emphases on the slowness of cultural change. Yet, for many of those I worked with, their Christianity was more than a social and cultural marker, but rather a belief system that significantly shaped their ethical and political practices. They also saw themselves as participating in a larger faith body and reached out to their faith family in the United States, as in the blog post above – reminding them of the duty to care for their Palestinian Christian ‘brothers and sisters’.

I therefore conceptualised Palestinian evangelicals as part of a transnational social field of evangelicalism (Levitt and Schiller, 2004), which is constituted by a variety of (historical) ‘flows’: of people, resources, ideas, and theologies. Attention to these ‘flows’, including within the theological realm, reveals the uneven co-constitution of Palestinian and Western evangelicals in their relation to Israel. The insights of the work on the relationship between Anthropology and Theology (Bialecki et al., 2008; Cannell, 2006; Fountain, 2013; Fountain & Lau, 2013; Howell, 2007; Lemons, 2018; Meneses & Bronkema, 2017; Robbins & Engelke, 2010; Robbins, 2003b, 2006, 2013) fundamentally shaped my view of Palestinian evangelicals not just as part of their local context, but as part of a larger ‘interpretative regime’ (Crapanzano, 2000) of global evangelicals (cf. Calder, 2017). Had I not been attentive to their theological commitments, I might not have understood the nuances of their positioning within ‘global’ evangelicalism, and the role of power in this process. Palestinian evangelicals often wrestled with the demands of a dominant theological narrative and their political and ethnic identity in the Israeli state. Yet, even my taking seriously the theology of those I worked with did not challenge my assumption that Palestinian evangelicals were

developing an anti-dispensationalist stance from within the mainstream of the Palestinian (evangelical) church.

My second point therefore relates to the historical theologies that have shaped current evangelical engagement with the Israeli state: attention to these allowed me to understand the wrestling of Palestinian evangelicals with their citizenship in the Israeli state in greater depth. Significant here has been to understand how the theologies of Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism have developed within particular social and political contexts over the *longue durée*, and the effects of translating these culturally contextual theologies into the Israel-Palestine context by Palestinian evangelicals themselves. Important work in the study of the development of Christian Zionism has been carried out for example by Sean Durbin (2018), Robert Smith independently (2013) and together with Goran Gunner (2014), or Donald Lewis (2014). Their key contribution has been to portray Christian Zionism not just as ‘theology’ but also as ‘cultural transmission’ (Smith & Gunner, 2014) or ‘identity’ (Lewis, in press). This identification explains the complexity of challenging Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism, seeing that literalist theologies are rarely open to re-interpretation. Rather, as Brian Malley (2004) has shown, instead of inheriting a ‘hermeneutic’ tradition, evangelicals actually inherit an ‘interpretative’ tradition (Malley 2004: 73ff). They do not pass on methods for *reading* the Bible, but pass on *sets of beliefs* that are tied to biblical texts. To challenge such an understanding therefore equates to challenging a more fundamental historically rooted view of the world and of the nature of biblical interpretation.

‘Citizens of heaven’ and citizens of Israel-Palestine

The complex navigation of Palestinian evangelicals’ citizenship in the Israeli state and simultaneous belonging to their global faith family illustrates the insights generated by this theologically engaged anthropological approach. So, in light of these two points, how can we interpret the unusual demand for citizen’s rights, and defiance of their apolitical dispensationalist heritage, of Palestinian evangelicals in the context of the school strike? I suggest that firstly, the strike was seen as the ‘better option’ in a conflict between being able to foster good Christian selves through the work of the evangelical school, and a withdrawal from politics and hesitance to criticise the Israeli state. Palestinian evangelicals framed their fighting for the continuing existence of the school, which was initially founded by American missionaries, by ensuring that their own ministry among the next generation of potential

believers could persist. In the American context, this temporary suspension of apoliticism is summarised well in Bialecki's (2017: 47) discussion of Harding's (2000) work on American fundamentalists: "apocalyptic fatalism did not preclude theologically conservative Christians from imagining effective short-term political action". A similar dynamic seemed to be at work here. Temporary political action was permissible to ensure the fostering of evangelical selves in the future.

Amid these trade-offs, Palestinian evangelicals had to navigate a careful balance between resisting an American understanding of complete separation between church and state, and using their American evangelical contacts to intervene on their behalf. In some of the online exchanges I saw between Palestinian and American evangelicals on the matter, Americans assured Palestinians that they would 'pray' for the situation. As Kevin O'Neill (2015) has shown, the act of prayer is one way in which Christian citizenship and participation in national politics is expressed and believed to be effective. Under different circumstances, prayer was the preferred tool for action by Palestinian evangelicals, too. In this situation, however, many Palestinian evangelicals felt this was not enough: rather, 'real' political action was needed to change the Israeli government's stance on the school funding. This was countered by American evangelicals with the argument that the state should not interfere in Christian education at all – instead of fighting for government funding, Palestinians should seek other sources of support for their schools. Following a long history of discrimination, however, Palestinian evangelicals recognized the school strike not as battle between church and state (as in the American context), but as quest for equality as ethnic minorities. Following this, some Palestinian evangelicals observed that the American advocacy on their behalf was effective because the Israeli state wanted to maintain the image of being a 'democratic country'. This notion is often used by American evangelicals in their lobbying for the state ('Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East') and as justification for their support of its state institutions. The American support therefore was not necessarily framed as criticism of Israel's exclusivist policies, but rather as reminder that demonstrations and demand for citizen's rights should be heeded in a democratic process.

Secondly, it was often emphasised to me by Palestinian evangelicals that this was a civil, not a (Palestinian) nationalist struggle. This meant that evangelicals did not have to reassess the more far reaching questions regarding the theological significance of the Israeli state, or the extent of their citizenship within in. Many Palestinian evangelicals, as many members of their global faith family, equate the national struggle with violence and Islam, and so prefer not to

associate with it at all. One of the pastors I interviewed went so far as to say that the even the Palestinian contextual theology developed at the two Palestinian evangelical Bible colleges in Nazareth and Bethlehem respectively was “feeding Islamic thought”. He also believed that Christians in the West Bank suffered more under Islamic fundamentalism than under the Israeli occupation. Effectively, this belief leads to disengagement with the Israeli Occupation’s effects on Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. An elderly evangelical lady I knew had never crossed the checkpoint to the West Bank, and insisted to me that only criminals get checked and searched by Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints – suggesting an image of the ‘dangerous’ Arab that has a long history in evangelical Protestant thought (Ariel, 2006; Carenen, 2012), despite sharing the same ethnicity.⁷ Thus, by framing the school protests as civil, rather than nationalist, struggle – and carefully avoiding any support by nationalistic parties who wanted to re-interpret the struggle for a nationalist agenda – Palestinian evangelicals stayed clear of a more far-reaching clash with the government. The criticism of the government was phrased gently and respectfully, which led evangelicals afterwards to point to the example they set in how the demonstration was carried out.

Thirdly, participating in the protests raised the profile of the Palestinian evangelical churches among their fellow Christians overall – both in view of the established denominations and the messianic Jewish congregations.⁸ Palestinian evangelicals are sometimes accused of being ‘traitors’, and in league with pro-Israel American Christian Zionists by members of established denominations, due to the funding they continue to receive, their global connections, and a lack of support for alternative approaches (such as *Christ at the Checkpoint*). The Palestinian evangelical theologians Azar Ajaj (2018) leads this back to the strong influence of Western evangelicals on Israeli policies, and explains that for a long time, Palestinian evangelicals preferred to refer to themselves rather as ‘believers’ than as ‘evangelicals’. Hence, Palestinian evangelical churches are careful not to offend established denominations, for example by holding their services not in ‘competition’ on a Sunday morning (though this is also because Sunday is a work day and employees may not be able to

⁷ This could be compared – even if Palestinian evangelicals are not actually criminal – to Kevin O’Neill’s ex-gang members’ efforts to clear themselves of the image of the ‘criminal’ (O’Neill, 2010: 339).

⁸ Messianic Judaism is a form of Christianity who acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, but otherwise continues to adhere to Jewish rites and festivals. Some messianic Jews are Jews who have converted to this form of faith, but many are non-Jewish Christians who feel drawn to this type of Christianity, especially in the USA (Kaell, 2015).

attend services otherwise). In the protests, they both stood with other Christian schools, and were proud that they could draw on their American evangelical connections to achieve positive change.

Palestinian evangelical relations to messianic Jews are often strained, seeing that they tend to be openly Christian Zionist and therefore attract much of the American evangelical funding. In a sense, messianic Jews could be regarded as the ‘ideal’ Jew within Judeo-centric evangelical prophetic interpretations, since they accept Jesus as the messiah and yet maintain the biblical Jewish practices (Smith, 2013). There are roughly 15,000 messianic Jews in Israel-Palestine⁹, organised in ca. 250 congregations (some of which meet in illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank).¹⁰ Many of these are former Western evangelicals who have taken on a ‘Jewish identity’ (Kaell, 2015). While some efforts exist to find common ground between Palestinian evangelicals and messianic Jews, progress is minimal.¹¹ During the school strike, messianic Jews remained largely silent, in what one anonymous messianic Jewish author called a missed opportunity for reconciliation (W., 2016). At the same time, a Palestinian evangelical lady prominent within evangelical circles was keen to share with me that the messianic Jewish organiser of a charismatic women’s conference happening at the same time got up and repented of the Israeli government and the silence of messianic Jews on the topic. My friend felt that this “changed something in the heavenlies”, and that her repentance “released something”, which later resulted in the (temporary) solution to the funding battle. For her, this episode was a reminder that God is still in charge and has “his timings”. In a sense therefore, at least for parts of the Palestinian evangelical community, there was a perception that the action and prayer around the school strike served to unify Christians from all background in the Holy Land.

⁹ As with Christian denominations, numbers are hard to obtain, though this number is cited in various reports and obtained from the US Department of State 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom: Israel and The Occupied Territories, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2015/nea/256269.htm> (last accessed 30/01/2017).

¹⁰ According to the messianic Jewish news network in Israel, which contains a directory of messianic Jewish congregations, <http://app.kehilanews.com/directory> (last accessed 30/01/2017).

¹¹ For example, several conferences between Palestinian evangelical and messianic Jewish leaders have been held on Cyprus to work towards reconciliation (Lausanne, 2018), and organisations such as the reconciliation organisation *Musalaha* promote exchange between young people from these groups (Munayer & Loden, 2014)

Palestinian evangelicals: an anatomy of an anomaly

I noted earlier that from a theological perspective, a Christian's understanding of citizenship is reflective of their understanding of their own God-given place in the world. From an anthropological perspective, the notion of citizenship is associated with political subject formation, membership and belonging, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. Palestinian evangelicals inhabit a unique, complex, and counter-intuitive position as they form a "minority of a minority of a minority" in Israel-Palestine: as evangelicals among a Christian majority of established denominations, as Christians among a Muslim co-ethnic majority, and as Palestinians in a Jewish state. Further, they also form a minority in view of the dominant theologies of a 'global' faith community. The example of the school strike sought to illustrate how these dimensions are navigated in a community that is heavily influenced by a particular 'interpretative regime' of Dispensationalism, and how only a joint anthropological and theological lens was able to render the nuances of their unusual political action visible.

While the school and Palestinian Baptist churches are formally independent, they still are reliant on financial partners, many of whom are associated with the theological traditions of their founders. This is also partly due to the fact that – as many Palestinian pastors who struggle on a meagre salary have told me – Palestinian evangelical congregations lack a culture of tithing following a long dependence on American missionaries, and a cultural background of established denominations with institutionalised funding structures. It certainly is easier to find generous donors when one complies with what still is the dominant theological position on Israel. There are financial incentives not to speak out against Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism.

Palestinian evangelicals have ambivalent relationships to the Israeli state and their larger faith family. The school strike demonstrated the contradictory nature of some of these ambivalences, and the difficulty in reconciling inherited notions of Christian citizenship with their 'worldly' citizenship in the Israeli state. Some members of this community highlight the strengths of their unique identity, considering themselves as serving as a "bridge" between the different communities of which they are a part. Others experience their position as inherently weak and voiceless, and feel the threat of the majorities around them. This is – quite understandably – one of the reasons why friendship and partnerships with the most powerful centres of evangelical Christianity, and their Western counterparts, and the moral and emotional support as a result of these connections, is so attractive to many Palestinian evangelicals. It means that even 'political' actions around basic rights are conducted in

careful consideration of their larger evangelical faith family, and critiques phrased carefully in a way that does not conflict with the dominant theologies of Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism.

I have sought to demonstrate in this paper that by paying attention to the theological commitments and heritage of those I worked with, and conceptualising their belonging to a wider transnational faith community, the complex power dynamics that influence and shape Christian communities come to the fore. While I showed this at the unique example of the Palestinian evangelical community with their specifically challenging belonging to the State that is at the centre of the evangelical cartography, I believe this approach could be usefully applied in other contexts, too. Attention to the *longue durée* perspective of historical theology, the theological commitments of those we work with, and the dynamics within transnational religious movements in a ‘theologically engaged anthropological approach’ can shed further light on the possibilities and constraints of beliefs and practices of contemporary faith communities.

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