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Anglican priest disgraces authentic Christianity

By Dexter Van Zile

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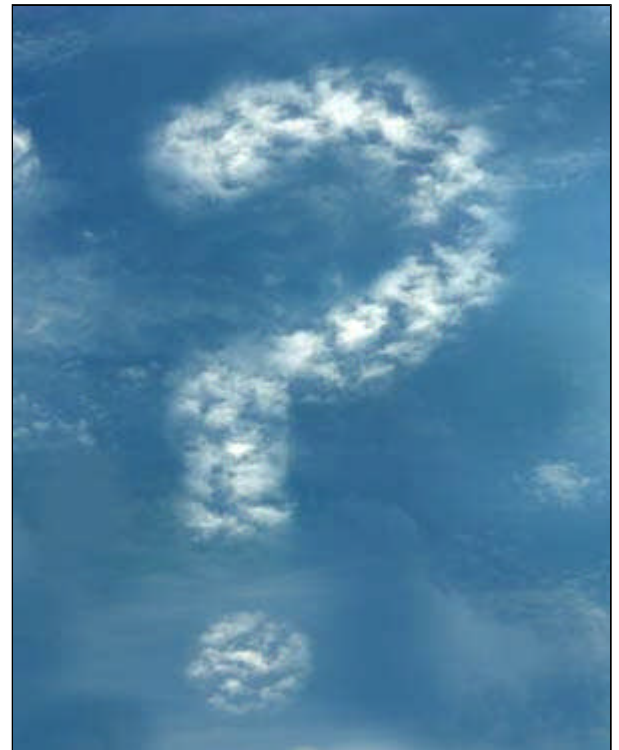
Dexter Van Zile, a JWR reader (and lifelong Christian) asks what type of god inheres in the so-called peacemaking ministry of Anglican Priest Naim Ateek, founder of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | Anglican Priest Naim Ateek is making the rounds in support of his most recent book, A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation (Orbis, 2008), in which he falsely accuses Israel of perpetrating a "slow and creeping genocide" against Palestinians — who have one of the fastest growing populations in the world.

Apparently, leveling false accusations at the Jewish people and their homeland is not enough to get one barred from polite society in 21st century America.

So much for history progressing in an upward spiral.

In February, Ateek, founder of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, appeared at churches in Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta and Washington, D.C.



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And on July 18-20, Ateek appeared at a number of venues in the Puget Sound region of Washington State. In addition to appearing in churches, Ateek appeared for the first time before a congregation of American Jews — at the Kadima House in Seattle.

The centerpiece of Ateek's Puget Sound tour was his June 20, 2009 appearance on Weekday, a radio show hosted by Steve Scher and broadcast on KUOW, an NPR station in Seattle. During his radio appearance, Ateek returned to a persistent theme in his writings: the notion that the god described in some of the Hebrew Scriptures is a primitive, violent and territorial god who cares only about Jews.

During the interview, during which Scher lobbed softball questions, Ateek described Palestinian liberation theology as a way of helping people understand "how the Bible has been abused by Jewish religious extremists and Christian Zionists [who are] using the Bible against the Palestinians."

According to Ateek, "people quote from Genesis that G-d has given the land to the Jewish people. So the land is given by God so they have a divine right to the land and the Palestinians have no rights. They need to go. It is the wrong way of interpreting scripture. Palestinian liberation theology comes to really help people understand that the message of the Bible is not about a god who is a person concerned about a piece of land here or there, but a god of justice, a god of peace, a god of compassion."

During the interview, Ateek stated that some books in the Hebrew canon — most notably Daniel and Jonah — offer a critique and an alternative to this "exclusive, bigoted god who says I'm gonna go with you to war, I'm gonna kill your enemies."

Scher, who did not raise concerns about Ateek's use of anti-Jewish polemics from the New Testament against the modern state of Israel, also failed to address a central question that needs asking: What type of god is propounded in Ateek's so-called "peacemaking" ministry?

It's an obvious question given Ateek's criticism of the exclusive and bullying god that he says Jews and Christian Zionists use to justify Israeli policies.

Ateek, who condemns belief in a god that would direct its blessing exclusively toward the Jewish people, propagates the agenda of a god who directs its judgment and anger at Israel, especially its Jewish inhabitants. Ateek does not openly confess allegiance to such a deity — in fact he denies doing so. Nevertheless, his commentary about the Arab-Israeli conflict provides a resting place, an ark, for just such a god.

For example, during his appearance on Weekday, Ateek asserted that the "Today the Jewish people are not suffering. They are the oppressors. ... They can be relieved from their suffering if they do justice. I think part of the suffering of the Jewish people, or Israeli, I mean — not Jews I mean because there are still more Jews outside Israel

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than there are Jews there — they can have greater security. Israel doesn't want peace. That's part of the problem and Israel wants to get rid of the Palestinians and that's unfortunately what has been happening. So Israel can relieve itself from so much suffering if it does justice in that sense."

On this score, Ateek accords Israel with the power to unilaterally bring an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict through concessions and peace offers. In Ateek's logic, the fact that Palestinians have engaged in persistent acts of violence against Israel is proof of Israeli intransigence — not Arab rejectionism. Exactly who wants to get rid of whom in the Middle East?

For Ateek, Israel's offer at Camp David in the summer of 2000, its acceptance of the Clinton Parameters the following winter, its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and Olmert's 2008 offer to withdraw from 93 percent of the West Bank are meaningless. Despite these and other concessions and withdrawals, Ateek regards violence against Israel as Israel's fault.

In sum, nothing Israel does is good enough for the god who animates in Ateek's sermonizing, and very little of what the Palestinians have done wrong is worthy of divine judgment, or even a benign admonition.

For example, on October 5, 2000, soon after the beginning of the Second Intifada, when a real peacemaker would be calling for calm and for an end to violence, Ateek issued a statement that portrayed Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount on Sept. 28 as a "violation" and a "desecration" and asserted that "It was right for our Palestinian Muslim brothers and sisters to stand up in the defense of their holiest place, al-Haram al-Sharif, when it was being threatened and desecrated."

On its face, "standing up in defense of their holiest place," seems like a pretty benign affirmation of nonviolent action, unless of course one takes into account the fact that five Israelis had been killed by Palestinian violence in the two weeks before Ateek issued this statement.

While Ateek gives close scrutiny to the theology of Christian Zionists and Jewish extremists, he gives light treatment to the theology motivating Muslim violence against Jews and the Islamic refusal to accept the notion of a sovereign Jewish state. His painstaking exegesis of the Hebrew scriptures and repeated invocations of Christianity's universalism — which are invariably targeted at Jewish beliefs and policies — testify to a god obsessed and offended by the Jewish refusal to accept Christianity, and silently indifferent to a Muslim intolerance toward Jews.

Muslim theology regarding the land and the Jewish people plays a significant, if not dominant, role in fomenting violence against Israel in the Middle East, but neither Ateek nor the group he leads, Sabeel, address these subjects in a meaningful way.

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One question that Scher could have asked of Ateek is why he spends such a disproportionate amount time condemning Christian Zionists, who have never blown up a bus, and the small number of Jewish settlers whose violence toward Palestinians, while condemnable, does not even come close to the misdeeds perpetrated by groups like Hamas and Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade against Israelis.

The story Naim Ateek tells about the Arab-Israeli conflict, cloaked as it is in the language of Christian peacemaking, attests to the existence of a deaf, dumb and blind god who would use Muslim and Arab violence against Israel as a scourge against the Jewish people.

Such a god is not worthy of worship.

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