

A religious spin *path Ju*

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“You mean, there are Palestinian Christians?” I am often asked, incredulously and with a renewed sense of interest in the Middle East. I understand the confusion. All Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs - isn't that the popular belief? So it's not surprising that many view the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict as Muslims versus Jews. Unfortunately, there are those who strategically exploit this lack of knowledge for political gain or to realise "prophecy," like Christian Conservative Gary Bauer who organised a letter of warning to President George Bush.

Twenty-two evangelical leaders stated in the May 19 letter that any attempt to be "evenhanded" between Israel and the Palestinians would be "morally reprehensible". A few weeks ago, Rev. Pat Robertson accused Bush of imperilling Israel with the roadmap, citing the Bible "which speaks very harshly of those who divide the 'Promised Land.'" How many potential Americans believe this? "There are 70 million of us" Reverend Jerry Falwell explained to CBS' Bob Simon on June 8, 2003, in a segment called "Zion's Christian Soldiers: 'If there's one thing that brings us together quickly, it's whenever we begin to detect our government becoming a little anti-Israel.'"

Falwell certainly proved his allegiance to Israel when he promised Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu in 1998 that he and others would mobilise evangelical churches to oppose steps involving territorial concessions to the Palestinians. Palestinian evangelical pastors and theologians later responded to Falwell in a Feb. 1, 1998, letter: "Our task of sharing the love of Christ in this region is becoming increasingly difficult as our brothers and sisters in the West openly express sentiments and endorse policies that produce greater injustice and aggression against Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Ultimately, Falwell can't speak for all evangelical Christians, but many believe the Bible promised the Jews the entire Holy Land, including the occupied territories. And some evangelicals also believe the Second Coming of Christ is contingent upon the full return of Jews to Jerusalem. However, the fact that Palestinian Christians are united with Muslims in the goal for liberation proves that the conflict isn't so much religious as it is nationalistic and human. Palestinian Christians have been among the most fervent players in the battle against Israeli occupation. Consider spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi; the award-winning literary critic Edward Said; Jerusalem Latin Patriarchate Michel Sabbah; Melkite Reverend/Author Elias Chacour; and revolutionary, George Habash.

The reality is that 15 per cent of the world's Palestinians are Christian. Palestinian Christians, also referred to as "the living stones" for having been witness to Jesus and the Resurrection, are a vibrant community who has experienced suffering no less than Palestinian Muslims. From the bloody Crusades to the dispossession of Palestine's inhabitants in 1948, discrimination has never known religion.

In the latest uprising for freedom, Palestinian Christians have not only been killed, but many have been maimed for life by Israeli bullets. Christians have also suffered under the inhumane siege by not being able to leave their towns, go to their jobs, seek medical care and attend schools. Among the hardest hit by Israeli F-16 bombardment is the Palestinian Christian city of Beit Jala. And few Palestinian Christians will ever forget Palestinian altar boy Johnny Thaigieh who was killed by Israeli gunfire in Manger Square in Bethlehem. Cars flattened indiscriminately by Israeli Merkava tanks and blown-out windows, as well as confinement of the populations, have left the Palestinian Christian population reeling under the Israeli government.

I can understand the PR value for Israelis who try to exclude Palestinian Christians from the Middle East equation. With the unfair vilification of Islam, who would Western public opinion favour? But those who insist on painting this conflict in religious terms are fooling themselves if they think my relatives desire freedom any less than the Muslims. And while evangelical leaders who warned Bush not to be "even-handed" in peace negotiations believe they are speeding up the Second Coming of Christ, it was Christ who said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Which is it?