

*Palestinian Liberation Theology. Seeking Social Justice Through a
De-Zionization of the Holy Scriptures*

Elisa Farinacci, University of Bologna, Italy

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Abstract

This proposal focuses on the development of a Palestinian Liberation Theology as a consequence to the establishment of the sovereign State of Israel. In particular, the paper examines the ecumenical efforts set forth by Sabeel a liberation theology movement established in 1990 near Jerusalem. This center addresses both the question of promoting an inclusive non-Zionist interpretation of the scriptures and using the Bible as a tool for justice, peace, and nonviolence. This proposal will thus discuss the agency of this Christian movement, which operates both at individual level by offering a fresh interpretation of the Bible and its message to the believers, as well as at community level by establishing a modality of behavior for the Arab Christian communities in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We suggest that the development of a Palestinian Liberation Theology represents a creative religious action enacted by a Christian minority in order to address the theological and social challenges raised by the establishment of a sovereign state which uses the Hebrew Bible, shared in part both by the Christians and the Jews, to legitimize its presence and expansion.

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The question leading this investigation focuses on understanding whether the Arab Christian religious minority has the potential to become an effective agent in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the grassroots through a faith-based perspective. In trying to answer this question we have decided to focus on Sabeel ecumenical Liberation theology movement and its development of a Palestinian Liberation Theology. In this work we wish to suggest that the efforts of this movement in developing a Palestinian Liberation theology can be read as a creative religious action that moves both at individual as well as at community level to address the theological and social challenges raised by the establishment of a sovereign state of Israel that, through the Bible shared in part both by the Christians and the Jews, legitimizes its presence and expansion. In fact, precisely through an inclusive de-Zionized theology, Sabeel promotes an innovative hermeneutic proclaiming the non-exclusive ownership of the Land of Israel, which would admit both Jews and non-Jews to peacefully live on this land. We believe that Saba Mahmood's articulation of agency as historically and culturally specific allows us to avoid an interpretation of Sabeel's actions as mere resistance against oppression, which would overshadow the actual peculiarity of choosing to address the political and social situation in this region from a faith perspective. In fact, we argue that through Sabeel's endeavors of proposing a different theological exegesis of the Old Testament, a new religious subject is also shaped positioning him as an active seeker of justice and promoter of a nonviolent approach to peace building at grassroots level. In this assertion we follow the strand of scholars who has «focused on the formation of pious subjectivities and ethical selves through the cultivation of embodied dispositions, where moral reform is itself a political project of ethical self-fashioning» (Deeb 2009: 113) such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood. Through their analytical framework, we can read Sabeel's Liberation theology as a contextual action aimed at molding through an innovative hermeneutic a religious subject projected towards a political endeavor to achieve social justice for the Arab Palestinian people which may lead to a just peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The establishment of a sovereign Israeli State in the XX century has raised a particularly interesting religious issue when dealing with the local Christian population. In fact, in the domain of worship, the homonymy of the name "Israel" in the Holy Scriptures and the modern nation state of Israel has created exegetical confusion, which in turn has been used to legitimize peculiar political schemes aimed at the Jews' acquisition of the land of Palestine without its Arab people.

This Jewish state, as revealed by the 2011 census¹, hosts 2 percent of Christian citizens within its borders while in the Palestinian Territory they represent 1.37% of the Palestinian population². Less commonly known is the development of a Palestinian Liberation Theology among a group of local Christians to address their socio-political situation in this geographical area. The subject concerning liberation theology has been present in the public scene for quite some time. In fact, the attempt

¹ The percentage of Arab Christians within the borders of the State of Israel given by the Bureau of Statistics dates at the 24th of December, 2011. In the census the Christians numbered 154.500 representing 2% of the population and 84,4% of them are of Arab Ethnicity. http://www1.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2011n/11_11_328e.pdf

² See also P.G. Gianazza (2008), *Guida alle comunità cristiane di Terra Santa*, Bologna, EDB; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Population, Housing and Establishment Census-2007. Press Conference on the Preliminary Findings (Population, Buildings, Housing Units and Establishments), February 2008. <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps>

to propose a renewed ecclesiology finds its base in the second chapter of the *Lumen Gentium* “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” addressed by the Second Vatican Council and firstly developed in the second half of the XX century in Latin America. The approach adopted in Latin America, of considering the social reality as a starting point for theological consideration where theology of liberation becomes aware of exploitation, marginalization, and poverty, as well as violations of human rights, did not remain confined in its context, but inspired other theologians around the world to adopt and adapt its message to their situations. We can witness the appearance of such a theology also in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Like other liberation theologies around the world, Palestinian liberation theology arose as an attempt to address the needs of the local Christian population, however the Palestinian contexts presents a particularity compared to Liberation theologies in other geographical areas. Although the Bible becomes a source of liberation for theologies around the world, in Israel Zionist Jews and Western Christian Zionists have used it in support of unjust actions.

Within the Palestinian context, the need for a unique Liberation Theology that is relevant and responsive to the needs of the Palestinian population was heightened by the fact that much of their oppression has a distinctly misinterpreted theological basis. Christian Zionism has been successful in providing not only theological justification for Palestinian displacement, forced exile and continued oppression, but is also directly responsible for marshaling material resources to the Israelis³.

When some parts of the Bible are today applied literally to a situation «the Bible appears to offer the Palestinians slavery rather than freedom, injustice rather than justice, and death to their national and political life» (Ibid., 75). In fact, the birth of a sovereign State of Israel raises the question on the relationship between ancient Biblical history and our contemporary history. As former Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah explains, the Arab Christian population in this context needs to ask «is Biblical Israel the same as the contemporary State of Israel? What is the meaning of the promises, the election, the Covenant, and in particular the “promise and the gift of the land” to Abraham and his descendants?» (Sabbah 2009, 26). Particularly the question of land ownership, which represents the heart of the conflict in the Middle East, involves the usage of the Hebrew Bible as a legitimate source to land expropriation in the Palestinian Territories by the State of Israel. Thus, a theology of liberation in Israel and the Palestinian Territories cannot offer liberation through the scriptures unless they undergo reinterpretation. A new urgent need for an innovative hermeneutics arose, thus calling firstly, for a resolution of the conflict within each Christian believer with the message of their Scriptures and only then this will give the whole Christian community the strength to seek justice and reconciliation through the newly liberated scriptures.

Thus Sabeel⁴, an ecumenical center born to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a theological approach of nonviolence⁵, became the center of development of Palestinian Liberation theology precisely to address this concern. The theology

³ Cornerstone Issue 1, Spring 2004.

⁴ «Sabeel means two things in Arabic. It means “the way,” which is very close to “*shvil*” in Hebrew and it also means “spring of water”» interview to Naim Ateek by Brant Rosen

<http://rabbibrant.com/2014/03/24/land-and-liberation-an-interview-with-reverend-naim-ateek/>

⁵ See also J. Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2008

elaborated and proposed by Sabeel is a contextual theology⁶, that is, a theology deeply rooted in the Palestinian historical context that involves the predicaments arisen with the birth of the State of Israel, which addresses the need of liberation of the Palestinian Christians. Its founder, Father Naim Stifan Ateek⁷, believes that this community desperately needed «a proper and adequate understanding of the theological meaning of the Palestinians' experience with the State of Israel» (Ateek 1989, 2). Theologians of Sabeel feel that «in this context, it was necessary for the local Palestinian Church to respond to the challenges before it: the concrete material and political situation of oppression, deprivations, human rights violations and daily violence [and to] provide a theological perspective for a population that was in revolt against this oppression»⁸. Against this background, I show that via PLT, a new de-Zionized and inclusive interpretation of the Old Testament, Arab Christian members of Sabeel become agents⁹, active participants, in grassroots faith-based nonviolent approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Let us first retrace the historical events and social circumstances that lead to the development of a PLT to four main intertwined factors, the presence of a foreign distant clergy, a lack of involvement of the Church in socio-political affairs, the explosion of the first *Intifada* and an increasing support of the State of Israel's policy regarding the land appropriation by Christian Zionists.

If today the Churches decided to address the political problems of their people, this was not the case before the 1960s. «During the most of the first two decades of Israel's existence, its Christian churches remained quiescent, opting to stay out of politics» (Ateek 1989, 56). Since its foundation in 1948, the new State of Israel saw more advantage in cooperating rather than antagonizing the Church leadership openly. It sought to annex and control church property and in this was assisted by the fact that most church leaders were expatriates who believed Israeli rule was in the Church's best interest. Thus, until the leadership of many of the Churches remained predominantly foreign, it did not feel as deeply about the issues as did the indigenous

⁶ See also M. Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995.

⁷ Naim Ateek experienced a fairly typical *Nakba* refugee story. He was born in the Palestinian Muslim town of Baysan in the Eastern Galilee. When he was eleven years old, the Jewish forces led by the *Haganah* the *Yishuv* defence took control of the town of Baysan on May 12, 1948. After two weeks the town was evacuated, with the few Christian residents being bussed to Nazareth, the main Christian town in the Galilee (Kuruville 2013: 118-119). In 1959 Ateek left Nazareth, to pursue theological studies in the US graduating both for his Masters and PhD degrees from theological Schools in Berkeley, California (respectively from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific for his Masters Degree, and from the Graduate Theological Union for his PhD). He then headed back to Nazareth to take up the priesthood in the Anglican Church. He was confirmed as a Canon in charge of the Arabic-speaking congregation at St. George's Cathedral church in East Jerusalem, the headquarters of the Anglican Episcopal Church in the Holy Land (Kuruville 2013: 118-119). See also interview with Brant Rosen <http://rabbibrant.com/2014/03/24/land-and-liberation-an-interview-with-reverend-naim-ateek/> For other *Nakba* narration by Arab Christians see also E. Chacour, *We Belong to the land*, Notre Dame (IN), Notre Dame University Press 1990; E. Chacour, *Ho fiducia in noi. Al di là della disperazione*, Milano: Jaca Book 2003 (ed. Or. *J'ai foi en nous. Au-delà du desespoir*), Homme de Parole, 2002; P. De Somoni– M. Czerin, *Elias Chacour: israeliano, palestinese, cristiano*, Venezia: Marcianum Press 2009 (ed. Or. *Elias Chacour –Israeli, Palästiner, Christ.*), E. Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, Terrytown (NY), Chosen Books 1984.

⁸ *Sabeel* Liberation Theology Center, “Cornerstone”, issue 1, Spring 1994, 3. <http://www.sabeel.org/datadir/en-events/ev19/files/Issue%201.pdf>

⁹ P. S Rowe, “The Middle Eastern Christian as Agent”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42/(2010), 472-474.

membership thus avoiding addressing the socio-political conditions of the Palestinian Christian population (Ateek 1989, 56). It will be with the Palestinianization of the clergy, after the second Vatican Council, that a greater social and political engagement on the part of the various churches of Israel-Palestine arose. During the 1980s, three Palestinian Bishops were appointed respectively to the Anglican, Latin, and Greek Catholic Churches¹⁰ who showed the «theological and political courage to condemn the occupation of Palestinian lands and to demand liberation and a better deal for their Palestinian people» (Ibid: 116). Thus the progressive Palestinianization of the Churches' leadership and clergy brought a renewed attention and sensitivity to the socio-political situation of the Christian laity.

However it is with the explosion of the first *Intifada* that Sabeel will be conceived as a Christian reaction and contribution to this uprising. Especially in 1988, when the responses of the Israeli military and police became harsher through severe beatings crushing of hands to prevent stone throwing, clubbing, arrests, night raids on homes, and detentions (Ateek 1989: 46) that the churches of Palestine found themselves forced to take a «united stand against the oppression and injustice unleashed with all impunity by Israeli authorities» (Kurvilla 2013: 33-34).

However, the same period also saw a massive increase in the influence of Christian Zionist and Jewish Zionist nationalistic groups in Israel who sought 'biblically based' claims on the entire land of Israel or *Eretz Yisrael*, which resulted in the move among Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern Christians, to develop an alternative theological view that would counter this perspective (Kuruvilla 2013: 114).

Thus, in 1989 a special committee was created to actualize, on a practical level, a Palestinian liberation theology. People from different denominations, such as former Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour, Jonathan Kuttub, Jean Zaru, Cedar Duaybis, Samia Khoury and others were invited in order to have representation and perspectives from the Catholic, the Protestant and the Orthodox communities and in March 1990 during an international conference in Tantur Ecumenical Institute, designed to launch Palestinian liberation theology in the context of other liberation theologies around the world Sabeel was founded.

Sabeel can be defined as a theopolitical¹¹ movement since, although it does not possess any political affiliations, it deals with politics and with reality in a faith perspective. Its theology does not simply aim to critique, but it also offers a solution by providing alternative visions to the present unjust situation. This solution is biblically-based and it seeks to counteract the misuse of the Bible and it reveals how the Bible points to justice, liberation and Peace, from the context of a Theology of the land. In doing so, the members of Sabeel aim to critique the theology supported by Christian Zionists, which justifies domination of the land and Palestinian people from the perspective of ideas of election, choseness and the promised land¹². In fact, for this group «Israel stands at the center of God's plan for history, that it was established in fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and that Israel has a central and crucial role to play

¹⁰ Samir Ka'fity for the Arab Anglicans, Lutfi Lahham for the Greek Catholics and Michel Sabbah for the Latin Catholics

¹¹ See Y. Katanacho, *The Land of Christ. A Palestinian Cry*, Nazareth, Zondervan and Hodder & Stoughton, 2012.

¹² Ibid.

in the events that would lead to the second coming of Christ and the consummation of the present world» (Ateek 2008: 28). Let us now see how PLT actually reinterprets the meaning of the scriptures and redefines the role of the Arab Christian population. These issues can be addressed through the two approaches and areas of action of a Theology of Liberation and a Liberation of Theology¹³. The first approach aims at articulating a theology of liberation that «can help Palestinian Christians... address the conflict from within their faith» (ibid: 10). Hence, it focuses on helping ordinary local Christians to use the Bible as a tool for justice and peace. Father Ateek explains that there is a «a need to critique violence and evil being done in the name of God and God's word» (Ibid: 11) and that such a theology may offer true liberation for people living under occupation and to «help them work towards the liberation of others» (Ibid). As Hind Khoury, board member of Sabeel explains¹⁴, father Ateek through PLT «has taught us how to live out our faith and to make of it a source of individual and collective strength as well as a source of purpose simply by being a Christian driven by love, forgiveness, and the endless search for truth and justice» (Khoury 2012, 20).

The Liberation of Theology, on the other hand, concerns the interpretation of the actual scriptures, which becomes particularly problematic in this context especially when dealing with the understanding of the Old Testament's message. As former Latin Patriarch Michael Sabbah asserts «some people, exasperated by the abuse of the Bible in the present conflict, have begun to declare that the Bible or the Old Testament is nothing more than a simple history put together by the ancestor of the Jewish people, and that this book has nothing to do with the revealed books» (Sabbah 2009, 55). Hence, a Liberation of Theology becomes fundamental to bring a new understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament to the Christian population who sees it used to legitimize the Jews' right to the land. Therefore, the liberation of theology aims at encouraging a de-Zionization of the Bible, that is «learning to read the Bible as a story about a loving, just, inclusive God of all people rather than as a story of one particular nation or ethnic group» (Ibid., 12). These two approaches can be read through Asad's lens of interpretation when he addresses the category of religious symbols, to which this hermeneutics belongs, arguing that they «cannot be understood independently of their historical relations [...] or of their articulation in and of social life in which work and power are always crucial» (Asad 1993: 53). In fact the aim of Liberation theology in general, and of PLT specifically, is to “liberate” from an oppressive and marginalizing social and economic situation as well as incentivizing a personal transformation. In this dimension, we can understand the hermeneutics of PLT when they are read within the historically and socially specific context where they act, and in which they shape a new religious subject in response to the power structures operating within this context.

Thus, it does not come to us as a surprise that the popular text of Exodus, commonly used as the exemplary text for a liberation theology, results as problematic in the case of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Naim Ateek was against the use of the Exodus paradigm as an interpretative tool within PLT because, «what was constructed as liberation for the ancient Israelites was seen as slavery and subjugation for the

¹³ N.S. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice. A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books 1989.

¹⁴ Speech given at Sabeel's Eight International Conference held February 23-28, 2011 in Bethlehem, Palestine.

indigenous residents, the various Canaanite tribes of the land of Canaan. Transpose the situation directly into the twentieth century, with the arrival of large numbers of European Jews seeking refuge from anti-Judaic persecutions in Europe, colonizing the land of Palestine and depriving the original Arab inhabitants of their land and thereby livelihood» (Kuruvilla 2013: 123) and one of the most inspirational passages for liberation assumes a completely different connotation. In fact, in the eyes of many Westerners, Christians and Zionists, modern-day Palestinians had been substituted for ancient Canaanites. In his view, the 'divine' command to the Ancient Hebrew people to conquer-take over the land of Canaan and to subjugate and eliminate its inhabitants made the use of the Exodus paradigm exceedingly difficult as a 'liberationist' tool in the eyes of the Palestinian People.

Therefore, another passage from the Hebrew Bible was chosen to represent the liberation of the Palestinian people, as well as presenting the inclusive hermeneutic Ateek seeks: the book of Jonah. In the narration, God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh in order to preach against the evil ways of its people and call them to repentance. Jonah, instead of obeying, sails to Spain and God causes a storm to prevent him from fleeing. The storm threatens the survival of all the sailors on the boat, thus Jonah confesses his transgression of God's will and convinces the sailors that the only way to sedate the storm is to throw him overboard. The sailors follow his advice and God sends a big fish to swallow Jonah and safely deliver him to shore. At this point Jonah goes to Nineveh and carries out God's plan. The people of Nineveh repent, thus, deserving God's forgiveness and avoiding His disruptive wrath.

The traditional interpretation of this book focuses on the lesson of obedience that Jonah had to learn. However, «modern biblical scholarship interprets the book of Jonah as an allegory, similar to the parables of Jesus in the Gospels. Its deeper meaning emphasizes God's care and concern for Jews, but equally for non-Jews –in other words, the inclusive nature of God» (Ibid., 71). Since God in this story is not seen as exclusively associated to any one country or to any one place, Sabeel considers Jonah the archetypical Palestinian liberation theologian. In the book of Jonah, God is sovereign over and above all; God is not limited to one country or to any one place but everywhere; no one can hide from God (Ibid., 73).

This new Biblical exegesis brings us back to the problem that lies at the heart of the conflict between Palestinians and Jews: the identification with the land. For Palestinian Christian theologians, the theology of the land presented in the book of Jonah represents the emblem of the boundless activity and presence of God. «God could not be confined or contained within the boundaries of the little land of Israel» (Ibid., 74) and, in his message, the author of Jonah intended to liberate God from a narrow theology and liberate his people, the Hebrews, from a «tribal mentality that produced arrogance, haughtiness, and presumptuousness» (Ibid).

This theology promotes a reading of doctrines used to justify Israel's appropriation of Palestinian lands such as exodus, election, and promise of the land through the frame of an «inclusive relation to God and inclusive call to justice, peace, and not as claims of dominance of one group against another» (Ibid., 9). In other words, PLT «oppose any exclusive theology of the land» (Ibid.). From their point of view, what they are opposing is the exclusivist claim of the land by the Jews. As Reverend Ateek asserts, «both Western Christian Zionists and religious Zionists used scriptures to endorse

Israeli government against the Palestinians. It is essential, therefore, to critique such a theology of militarism, domination, and injustice as a Biblical aberration and emphasize instead that the authentic message of the Bible is a message of justice, mercy and peace» (Ateek 2008, 10).

If the story of Jonah deals with the liberation of theology, now we want to also mention another passage of the Bible, this time from the Gospels, used to emphasize the necessity of a theology of liberation that is, the merit of Sabeel to have enriched the political vocabulary and the political culture of the Palestinians. Sabeel was among the first to speak of the empowerment of civil society, of the strength and subversive nature of nonviolence and popular struggle (Safiyeh 2012, 41) and the parable of the persistent widow embodies the new religious subjectivity for Christians of Israel and the Palestinian Territories to follow.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ for a while he refused; but later he said to himself ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so she may not wear me out by continually coming’”. And the Lord said, “listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (Luke 18: 1-8).

This passage of the Bible, for Sabeel acquires special significance in the context of the local Palestinian Christians. What appears remarkable is the situation that it exposes: «There was a judge who neither feared God, nor had any respect for people». Jesus here presents a reality of life filled with hardship and great misery for the people who lived in the judge’s community. The judge is seen as an emblematic personage who does neither fear God, nor shows respect for other human beings; he is considered the personification of depravity. According to Father Ateek this character does not differ much from other men of power who became callous and amoral in their climb to the top: «power is too often in the hands of people who are without morality or a system of ethics. A modern way to describe such an entity would be, “there was a government that neither feared God nor had any respect for international law”» (Ateek 2008, 17). In this parable, Jesus, seen as the ultimate liberation theologian, sets his story in a hopeless context for the people of the city. This judge was expected by his role to enforce and protect justice, but instead he manifested a corrupted and hardened character. If we transpose the reading of this passage to today’s events in the «Palestinian context this one verse describes the reality of the injustice and oppression our people face. By virtue of its unjust actions, the government of Israel seems to demonstrate no fear of God or respect for people [...] it enacts laws that discriminate between Jews and Palestinians, and its judges enforce these laws» (Ibid.). Thus, we believe that through the use of this parable, Sabeel suggests that Arab Christians need to embody the plea of the widow «grant me justice against my opponent» (ibid. 18) and become active participants of society demanding for their rights and seeking peace for their religious community and for the Palestinians as a whole because «only justice can bring peace to both the judge and the widow» (Ibid.).

Conclusions

In trying to investigate the possibility of the Arab Christian minority to positively impact the peace building process in the Israeli-Palestinian context from a faith-based approach, the case study of Sabeel offers us important insights. Adopting the point of view of scholars belonging to the material discipline framework¹⁵ such as Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Lara Deeb, we are able to comprehend the work of Sabeel as contextual agency that, through a faith-based discourse, provides at the same time a new hermeneutic that makes the scriptures relevant and liberating for the local Christians as well as molding a new politically-active religious subject.

As Paul Rowe asserts, in the past ten to twenty years of Scholarship on Christian groups in the Middle East, specialists have begun to «recognize the agency of a population long objectified in both academic and polemical circles» (Rowe 2010, 472). Before then, Christians were long thought of as the objects of other actors such as the “products” of Muslim societies who imposed upon them the status of *dhimmi*, or as «appendages of external forces [...] as vehicles of imperialism» (Ibid.). Although these tropes still persist, over the last few years, scholars begun to consider and analyze the agency of Arab and other Middle Eastern Christians; «today we begin to understand the way [in which] the Christians operate not solely as a minority or as an extension of Western civilization but also as centuries-old groups rooted in the history and culture of the Middle East» (Ibid.). The movement Sabeel, and its involvement in promoting a PLT, represents one of the ways in which Arab Christian communities in Israel and the Palestinian Territories are exercising such agency.

The humanities and social sciences especially in the 1970s focused on the operations of human agency within structures of subordination (Mahmood 2005: 6). Especially in poststructuralist feminist theory agency often remains a liberatory one, conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion (Ibid: 14). Therefore, through this framework human agency is understood in connection to the concept of resistance set against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles¹⁶. It can be seen how this definition could easily fit the description of the Arab Christian case we have analyzed. However this perspective would relegate Sabeel's efforts to mere resistance against the politics of the State of Israel and miss the specificity and peculiarity of its religious-based agency. As Saba Mahmood articulates in her work *Politics of Piety*, agency, understood as «the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected)» (Ibid). Thus the meaning of agency cannot be «fixed in advanced, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being» (Ibid: 14-15). Through this framework we can see why Sabeel opted to seek a Biblically based justice instead of appealing, lets say, to the human rights idiom. If we contextualize agency then we see how historically, under Arab and Ottoman rule, non-Muslims were known as *dhimmi*, a term meaning followers of the religions tolerated by the

¹⁵ See S. Hazard, “The Material Turn in the Study of Religion”, *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4(2013), 58-78.

¹⁶ For further readings on this subject see also L. Abu-Lughod, , “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing transformations of Power Through Beduim women”, *American Ethnologist* 17/1 (1990), 41-45; J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive limits of “Sex”*, New York, Routledge 1993.

law. Since the *dhimmi* «were allowed the freedom to practice their religion and to manage their internal affairs through their own religious officials» (Ibid), the Christians in historic Palestine were consented to engage in an independent community, to observe their own customs and laws, and to retain their places of worship. These recognized religious communities benefitted from an autonomous jurisdiction in the sphere of personal status, such as family and inheritance laws, while the religious authorities held a function of political representatives of their communities. Religion in the State of Israel, still plays a predominant role inasmuch as the Ottoman law regarding the personal status of religious minorities, is still effective. That is, the religion of one's parents is fundamental in determining the religious affiliation of the newborn child. In fact if the parents are Christians, on the ID card of the son or daughter will be written "Christian" even if the child is not baptized. Moreover, when one wants to get married, there is no such thing as a civil union; one must marry within his or her religious community through a religious rite¹⁷. Therefore, since identity¹⁸ along with political and social rights are still dictated by religious affiliation, a different reading of the Holy Scriptures, focusing on a more inclusive perception of God, might be able to effectively push the discourse of justice and human rights in this particular context.

Therefore, the efforts of Sabeel's theologians may be read as fulfilling multiple social tasks within the Israeli-Palestinian society. By making the Scriptures once again relevant to the needs of the population and by addressing the social and political conditions of the Christian communities, Sabeel not only performs an agentive act aimed at subverting the oppressive policies of the state of Israel, but it also acts as a social, religious, and political positioning strategy aimed at shaping the individuals, and consequently society, as nonviolent grassroots faith-based peace builders. In fact, «Sabeel is a ministry of justice. From the position of faith, we are working for justice for the Palestinians and peace for all. Hopefully, this will lead eventually to reconciliation and healing¹⁹». The PLT through its innovative hermeneutic enables the Arab Christian devotee living in this geographical region to reconnect to the Old Testament and then use it in order to read his or her reality in a more inclusive and ecumenical manner. Therefore while resolving the personal inner conflict of the single believer, PLT also shapes a new religious subject positioning him theopolitically as an active seeker of justice and promoter of a nonviolent approach to peace building at grassroots level.

¹⁷ Let's keep in mind that religious communities in Israel and the Palestinian Territories are strongly endogamic given the fact that a interreligious marriage would inevitably necessitate the conversion of one of the two spouses because of the lack of civil unions. In the case of conversion the family and religious community of origin, in most cases, would disown the men or woman marrying someone of belonging to a different religious group. Furthermore, confessional schools are very common and highly attended by the three monotheism present in the territory.

¹⁸ See also A. R. El-Assal, *Caught in Between. The Extraordinary Story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli*, London, SPCK 1999.

¹⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/apr/29/comment>

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