

## **A Study of the Rev. Naim Ateek's Theological Writings on the Israel-Palestinian Conflict**

The faithful Jew and Christian regularly turn to the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament for wisdom, guidance, and inspiration in order to understand and respond to the world around them. Verses from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are regularly employed in the discussion of the Israel-Palestine conflict. While the inspiration for justice and righteousness on behalf of all who are suffering is a hallmark of both scriptures, the present circumstance in the Land of Israel poses unique degrees of difficulty for the application of Biblical text. The prophets of old speak eternal and absolute ideas, in the circumstance and the vernacular of their time. God speaks. Men and women hear. The message is precise. The challenge of course is to extract the idea and to apply it to the contemporary circumstance. The contemporary State of Israel is not ancient Israel of the First Temple period, 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, nor Judea of the first century. Though there are important historical, national, familial, faith, and communal continuities. In the absence of an explicit word of God to a prophet in the form of prophecy we can never be secure in our sense that we are assessing the contemporary situation as the ancient scriptural authors, and, more importantly, God, in Whose name they speak, would have us do.

If one applies to the State of Israel biblical oracles addressed to the ancient people Israel, one has to be careful to do so with a sense of symmetry. One cannot simply apply the oracles of prophetic judgment thereto, while ignoring those of promise and restoration, including the land-promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is not a point that nearly two thousand years of Christian tradition have prepared Christians to perceive so clearly as they should. Classically, the Church tended to apply the oracles of judgment and doom to the Jews, the stiff-necked, unbelieving "carnal Israel" or "Old Israel," who blindly crucified their own savior, but the oracles of promise and restoration to itself, the "New Israel," the beneficiary of divine love and grace, the "Body of Christ" awaiting its promised glorification. Given this legacy of replacement, supersessionism, and defamation, it is an enormous challenge for Christians to approach the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with an unclouded sense of the historical, political, social, economic, and military realities. The default position that their own Christian scripture and tradition suggests to them is just too ingrained and too available. It has a well-developed career. That position tempts them to conclude hastily that the Jews, as portrayed in Christian culture, ethnocentric, unethical, and grasping by nature, are once again exploiting or killing the innocent, in this case the Palestinian Arab. This may make for a good sermon or ten-second sound byte, but it does not reflect the complex history of Zionism or the history of the last two centuries of Jewish life in the region, or the region's endemic internal problems.

Worse, the prophetic sermon, this one-dimensional view, not only enables but re-energizes and re-analyzes the old supersessionist defamations that many of the Christian denominations righteously and courageously renounced in recent decades.

Criticism of policies of the Israeli government is surely no evidence of antisemitism, theological or other, but when those critiques are not comparative and contextual, but single out Israel, the telltale tradition is surely rearing its ugly head anew. This is all the more the case when Scripture is cited selectively and prejudicially, and the Jews are once again made to fit into certain ancient archetypes in defiance of the realities on the ground.

It appears that both mainline Protestant critics of Israel and the pre-millennial dispensationalist agree upon one thing, and that is that one can know the mind of God about the contemporary State of Israel by looking at passages in the Tanakh and the New Testament. In other words, what they both agree upon is to construe and present Judaism, the Jewish people, and all matters Jewish in their respective and unique Christian terms and categories.

A number of Christian clergy and thinkers apply Biblical verses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One institution and one person have led the way, the Sabeel: Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, and its director, Reverend Naim Ateek.

Rosemary Ruether's groundbreaking work, Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Antisemitism, provides a useful basis for the analysis of the theology of Sabeel, whose theological thinking has been developed by Naim Ateek. The critical features of the adversus Judaeos tradition, as presented by Rosemary Ruether, can be distilled as follows:

The Christians, no longer the Jews, are the true people of God. This is so because Israel has betrayed its universal mission to bring the message of the One God to the Pagans and to the Gentiles. Israel is radically parochial. Not only is Israel stubbornly parochial, but through its focus on the daily performance of the law, the Mitzvot, Israel has perverted the true spirit of monotheism, and is interested in the carnal, rather than the spiritual. Central to the adversus Judaeos tradition is the demonization of the Jews. Their reprobation is old and enduring. Jewish history is an unremitting trail of crimes. They are lower in God's economy than all others who have rejected Christ, because they who knew the Father at Sinai should have known the Son at Calvary. Because of this, the Covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai is canceled. Israel is punished with exile. It continues to suffer exile, because it hopes for a false Messiah, not accepting the true Messiah. The election of the Gentiles now substitutes for the election of Israel.

This can be summarized in five essential features: 1) the Hebrew Bible and Judaism are parochial and particular vs. the broad universalism of the New Testament and Christianity; 2) the Covenant made with the people Israel has been canceled; 3) exile is confirmation of the fallen state of Israel; 4) Israel, in rejecting the Christ and continuing to wait and hope for the Messiah, sins with false messianism; 5) The Jewish people embody evil, and are therefore demonized.

Let us now turn to Naim Ateek<sup>1</sup>. Naim Ateek calls for a more “mature understanding of God,” in which God expresses concern for all peoples, not just Israel. (p.92-96) Ateek identifies three traditions in the bible: the “Nationalist,” the “Torah-Oriented,” and the “Prophetic.” He considers the first two to be Jewish traditions and the third, while originally Jewish, is taken up and developed in Christianity. For Ateek, the “nationalist tradition” is found in the promises of God to Israel in the Bible, which Ateek denounces as “very narrow” and “militaristic,” because it emphasizes the Land of Israel and God’s special concerns for one people. The focus of the “Torah-Oriented Tradition” is somewhat more favorable because those who emphasize the study of Torah should have a fundamental religious obligation to reject political activity in favor of quietism and performance of the commandments. Nonetheless, this tradition is also denounced as tending “toward legalism and isolation.” Ateek claims that even Torah-oriented Jews have an insufficiently “mature” understanding of God because they also emphasize God’s special relationship with Israel. According to Ateek, only the Prophetic tradition truly reveals God. He argues that this is a late tradition, and the most evolved, because the focus is no longer on Israel, but on “all nations.”

Let us now read Naim Ateek at length.

The land that God has chosen at one particular time in history for one particular people is now perceived as a paradigm, a model, for God’s concern for every people and every land. As God commanded the Israelites to obey God’s laws in their life in the land, so God demands the same from all peoples in their lands. God’s unequivocal demand that the Israelites not defile or pollute the land with injustice, lest the land thrust them out, becomes a warning to all governments and to all peoples of every land. God requires every human being to live according to the divine standard of righteousness.

The particular has become universal. The blessing of God’s concern for one people is universalized to encompass every people and every land. Consequently, every nation can say about its own country, “this is God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references are to Naim Ateek, Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation. New York: Orbis, 1989.

land, God's country, this is a part of God's righteousness and justice in our land."

Such a blessing obviously does not exclude the Jews or the modern State of Israel. Neither does it justify their invoking an ancient promise—one that betrays a very exclusive and limited knowledge of God in one stage of human development—in order to justify their uprooting an entire people and expropriating their land in the twentieth century. To cling only to the understanding of God in those limited and exclusive passages is to be untrue to the overall Biblical heritage.

The tragedy of many Zionists today is that they have locked themselves into the nationalist concept of God. They are trapped in it and they will be freed only if they discard their primitive image of God for a more universal one (p.108-109).

This assertion that "the particular has become universal" is at the very heart of the Jewish-Christian encounter. It is the argument of the New Testament and the New Israel against the Old Testament and the Old Israel. However, because this position inspired the classic Christian tradition of the teaching of contempt for Judaism and the Jewish people, thus contributing two thousand years later to the destruction of European Jewry, most Christians today view the Jewish people as having a divine vocation of their own, and do not denigrate the familial and particular nature of Israel's continued covenant with the One God. Ateek, as cited above, says that the modern State of Israel invokes "An ancient promise – one that betrays a very exclusive and limited knowledge of God in one stage of human development – in order to justify their uprooting an entire people and expropriating their land in the 20<sup>th</sup> century." There are two problems with this statement. One problem is that he is simply not able to identify a single Israeli governmental source that uses the Bible as an explanation or justification for the State of Israel or for any given practice or policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Secondly, Naim Ateek does more, much more, than just extend the teaching of contempt from Judaism to Zionism, to the State of Israel, and to the present day Jewish people. Naim Ateek goes back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century. He explains the reasons why Christianity broke with Judaism. Those reasons are well-known. He repeats them. Ancient Israel is a people that professed a creed that is parochial, particular, and narrow; that believes that the One God is theirs only and not available for all of humanity, and for which they were punished with loss of their land and exile. This is an accurate description of the rationale of early Christianity and the Church fathers for breaking with Judaism. Ateek emphasizes the universalist trends in the Bible. In doing so, he follows the anti-Jewish polemics of early Christians. He holds that God is God of the world, that He is as much the God of the Gentiles as of Israel, and therefore, any reading of the Bible that focuses on the particular covenant with Israel is to be minimized or rejected. In other words, Ateek rejects an anti-

Jewish supersessionism, the belief that the Bible proves that the Gentiles take over Israel's place, in favor of an anti-Jewish universalism, the belief that the Bible undercuts the particular promises to Israel. Ateek holds that contemporary Jews have used God's promises to Israel to legitimate their presence in modern Palestine. For Ateek, this promise comes from what he calls the exclusive, narrow, or nationalistic part of the Bible, the part of the Bible that speaks about the relationship between a "tribal" and an "ethnocentric" God and one people, and is therefore morally offensive.

In a "Biblical Reflection On Genesis 12:3"<sup>2</sup>, when God says to Abram "I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and in you all the families of the Earth shall be blessed," Ateek comments:

For those who accept the literal historicity of this text, the words reflected the belief that some ancient Israelites held that God would bless their friends and curse their enemies. It was a primitive form of nationalism that looked at one's own tribal interest and brought down a curse on the enemies. Such pronouncements attributed to tribal gods were not uncommon in the ancient world.

In its context, Genesis 12:3 was addressed by God to Abraham before he had any children and long before he came to Canaan. There is no mention of "Israel" or "Jews" by name but the words have been understood as a blessing to Abraham's lineage...

...the prophet Amos observed how such arrogance was playing itself out in the way people of power were oppressing the poor of his day. He addressed them with God's word in a sharp and abrasive way. "O children of Israel, are you not the same to me as the Ethiopians?" says the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel out from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir? Surely the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth..."(Amos 9:7-8). For Amos, God's liberating activity and blessing were not restricted to Israel. It was going on all the time to others. In fact, God was carrying out various exoduses all along for other nations. As the Israelites had their exodus so did the Philistines and the Syrians. God's liberating power for the oppressed was not limited to one nation.

In the preceding paragraphs, Ateek treats the text of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish people as the New Testament and the early Church fathers did some two millennia ago. Whatever in the text is addressed specifically to one people, Israel is at an inferior stage of God's revelation. This is improved upon by later prophets, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Middle East Window*. June 2, 2004

perfected by Jesus. Ateek uses the words of the prophets of Ancient Israel to indict the State of Israel and the Jewish people, as the New Testament did. For Ateek to continue this enterprise long after it has been repudiated by most Christian groups is not just anachronistic; it is to begin the teaching of the contempt of Judaism and the Jewish people all over again.

Most mainline Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church no longer make such statements about Judaism and the Jewish people. Naim Ateek takes that 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian critique of Judaism and not only does he extend it to Zionism and to the State of Israel, but he asserts that what is so odious about the State of Israel is that the Jewish people are returning to their land, exercising sovereignty, building a majority Jewish culture; and in doing that, the Jewish people are once again committing the very same sins their ancestors did two thousand years ago. All of us know the horrific consequences of that position. To once again raise up those very ideas two thousand years later, and to, once again, indict the Jewish people and Judaism for that, is to begin the cycle all over again.

Ateek is simply wrong when he states that “the tragedy of many Zionists today is that they have locked themselves into this nationalist concept of God.” It must be said and repeated, over and over again—for the majority of the Jewish people, Zionism and the State of Israel have no religious significance whatsoever. Ateek’s medieval, theological assault on the Jewish people requires a Jewish people who use Biblical texts and covenants to prove their ongoing attachment to the land and the government policies that enable it. The truth, however, will not allow him to do that. We have not and will not oblige him.

Many in the mainline Protestant denominations subscribe to the spirit of Nostra Aetate, which calls upon Catholics to understand Jews and Judaism as they understand themselves; and to understand the Hebrew Bible in its context, in its history, and to respect the traditional and contemporary Jewish understanding of the Hebrew Bible. Ateek’s medieval rendition of the Hebrew Bible has been repudiated by most post-Shoah Christian treatments of Judaism.

Ateek conceptualizes the contemporary political conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians in Christian theological terms. A sermon that he delivered at Sabeel’s Alternative Assembly, Thursday, February 22, 2001 Notre Dame, Jerusalem, is worth studying. The title introduces its theme, “The Zionist Ideology of Domination vs. the Reign of God”. Zionist ideology is, by definition, opposed to the reign of God.

In a section entitled, “Living Under the Principalities and Powers” (p.1, par.2), Ateek refers thus to the State of Israel:

The struggle against the forces of evil must continue. We must be engaged in the struggle, but we cannot do it alone. We must do it with the armor of God.

In the next section entitled, “Jesus Suffered Under the Powers”, Naim Ateek tells us that during the lifetime of Jesus, there were three personalities who embodied the “powers of darkness”: Herod, Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas. He tells us that “Jesus was aware of these powers,” and that “he was killed by the collusion of both state and religious powers.” Ateek analogizes this to the contemporary State of Israel. He states it quite explicitly in the next section, entitled, “Where Zionism Has Gone Wrong”:

Let me now apply my words to the evil structures that have dominated the Palestinians for the last hundred years.

Thus, for Naim Ateek, the “powers of darkness” embodied in Herod, Pilate, and Caiaphas are now expressed in the State of Israel. This notion that Zionism and the State of Israel embody evil is an example of this point: Naim Ateek has extended the demonization of the Jews that is at the heart of the adversus Judaeos tradition to Zionism and to the State of Israel. In this sermon, he writes:

I believe that the original sin and crime was Zionism in the way it turned into a colonial force. Israel still lives and acts in the same basic ideology.

Have not enough Jews died for the application to them of a notion of an original sin, an enduring evil? The Jewish people, who for two thousand years were accused of deicide, are now accused by Naim Ateek of murdering a whole people in that very place in which Jews were alleged to have killed Jesus? In his view the Jewish people have returned to the scene of the crime to re-enact the crime all over again. Therefore, it will come as no surprise that in his Easter Message From Sabeel 2001 Ateek writes:

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, the suffering of Jesus Christ at the hands of evil political and religious powers two thousand years ago is lived out again in Palestine...

Here in Palestine Jesus is walking the via Dolorosa...

In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge Golgatha. The Israeli government **crucifixion system** (emphasis mine) is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull.

For these beliefs the Jewish people have paid dearly, but so has Christianity. While Christian antisemitism threatened the physical destruction of the Jewish people, it nearly caused the spiritual destruction of Christianity. Naim Ateek threatens the very integrity of Christianity itself. Christians should criticize whatever practice or policy of the government of Israel that they want, and at any given time they will find that some portion of the citizens of the democratic State of Israel are in agreement. But how could Christians allow people like Naim Ateek to serve as guides, as spiritual authorities, and as theological resources?

Ateek continues his sermon with a section entitled “The Reign of God”:

Our litmus test that we must use in such cases is based on what it means to love our neighbor. The Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, mentions the dictum, “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Unfortunately, in Classical Judaism it has been narrowly defined as being limited to loving one’s own fellow Jew.

This is a lie. It perpetuates a central feature of the adversus Judaeos tradition: Jews are parochial, and hence, evil; Christians are universal, and hence, good.

In Item 3 of the same section, he writes:

The Jewish religion sees non-Jews as the strangers in the land, without rights.

There are twenty-two nations in the Middle East. There is only one nation in the Middle East that has an independent judiciary that can hold the military, the security services, the executive and legislature of its democratic government accountable to suits brought by Arab citizens. That is the State of Israel. No Arab citizen of any Arab country has recourse to such an independent judiciary. Israel is the only one in which the Christian population enjoys natural growth.

In that same Item 3, he calls Judaism a “false religion” and continues:

That is why many of our people do not want to have anything to do with God. The god they see before them is a bigot, racist, land grabber, discriminator, prejudiced, hateful killer, and every other ugly adjective in

the dictionary. I would like to kill this god nonviolently. The true God must re-emerge. The God we have come to know in Christ is the God of peace, not war; the God of love, not violence; the God of justice and love, not injustice and hate.

To characterize the belief of the Jewish people in the One God this way is to engage in theological antisemitic rhetoric that most churches have repudiated.

Ateek closes the sermon with this statement:

Jesus Christ, living in our country as a Palestinian under occupation, offers us a different model of power.

In this view, the Palestinian people are Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Palestinian people. And the Jews continue to play the role they did two thousand years ago. None of us wants to return to those days, when a majority of Christians actually believed this, and acted accordingly. This identification of present day Palestinians with Jesus Christ, and of Israel, Zionists, and the Jewish people who support Israel with their ancestors, the ancient Jewish crucifiers, is a theme found regularly upon the lips of Naim Ateek. In “The Massacre of the Innocents – A Christmas Reflection,”<sup>3</sup> he writes:

The Magi went to Bethlehem, found Jesus, paid him their honor, gave him their precious gifts and returned home without going back to Herod, having been warned of his ill intentions. Wishing to leave nothing to chance, Herod ordered his security forces to sweep the Bethlehem area and kill all children under the age of two.

In the Christian tradition, Herod’s cold-blooded action is known as the Massacre of the Innocents, and its victims are regarded by the church as martyrs. It is a sobering reminder that the coming of the One whose life represents goodness and truth, peace and justice to the world, provoked an evil response from the ruling power. The innocents were helplessly caught between the domination of a violent man and the reign of the Prince of Peace.

The Christmas message for this year takes cognizance of the story of King Herod, the baby Jesus, and the massacre of the innocents. The events of the past three months of protest in Palestine have seen the killing of many children, youths, and even elderly people by the Israeli army...

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<sup>3</sup> *Cornerstone*. Issue 20, Christmas 2000.

At this Christmas time, when we remember the message of peace and love that came down from God to earth in the birth of Jesus Christ, our celebrations are marred by the destructive powers of the modern day "Herods" who are represented in the Israeli government.

King Herod 2000 years ago, who seeks to kill the baby Jesus, is now incarnate in Israel's army.

In a sermon entitled "Who Will Roll Away the Stone?" delivered in the Easter season of 2001<sup>4</sup>, Ateek takes as his text for the day that famous passage in Mark 16:2-3:

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'

This is the stone that covers the opening to the cave in which Jesus was interred. Ateek comments:

Israel has placed a large boulder, a big stone that has metaphorically shut off the Palestinians in a tomb. It is similar to the stone placed on the entrance of Jesus' tomb, which Mark the evangelist describes as being "very large." This boulder has shut in the Palestinians.

Finally, overlooking the Jewish people themselves or their legitimate interests, Ateek celebrates the exile of the Jews, because it helps the Gentile communities in which Jews are exiles. Jewish exile is good, he argues, because of its beneficial effect on Gentiles. For Naim Ateek, Jews nurture and foster a sense of "universal human life" by mixing with and caring for many different peoples of the world, rather than just developing the narrow, "communal particularity" of some modern Jews; or as a persecuted but faithful people, they teach the world about the vocation of suffering. Without sovereign power of their own, the exiled Jews illustrate the virtues of non-violence and powerlessness, and cultivate a deep dependence upon God (p.160). It is hard to imagine some six decades after the destruction of European Jewry that Jews would want to subscribe to these notions of the sanctity of powerlessness and weakness. Does he recommend the same for the Palestinians?

The analyses of Naim Ateek are grounded in Jesus' message of an inclusive and loving God. This is used to critique the alleged exclusivism of Zionism, the State of Israel, and the Jewish beliefs that are said to undergird both. By reintroducing classical Christian anti-Jewish concepts in his critique of the State of Israel and Judaism, he

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<sup>4</sup> *Cornerstone*. Issue 21, Spring 2001.

undermines recent attempts at fostering Jewish-Christian tolerance and respect. He introduces a distinctly medieval Christian perspective that results in a dangerous return to historic Christian anti-Judaism.

His criticisms differ from the criticisms of the practices of other governments, because of his presentation of Israel as connected to, and synonymous with the hoary sins of Judaism and the Jewish tradition. Most critics of Israel legitimately focus on the contemporary actions of the state and its institutions. He moves the debate to a terrifying level by explicitly assessing Israel, contemporary Judaism, and present-day Jewry in ancient and medieval Christian religious terms. Contemporary Israel is critiqued just as medieval Judaism was by Christianity. Because he conflates the State of Israel and Judaism, he turns a contemporary political dispute into a 2000-year old religious war, in which Judaism and the Jewish people are once again under Christian assault. The result is that not only does he misread Judaism, but he perpetuates ancient and medieval anti-Jewish accusations. Furthermore, he imports their Christian ideas about how Jews should act as Jews, embroiling Christians in the centuries-old tradition of judging Jews for lack of fidelity to the Biblical tradition. This is all the more troubling and surprising since many Christians have made a concerted effort to remove and reject anti-Jewish ideas. Until recently, Christian theological antisemitism demonized the Jews as Jews, as members of the Jewish people, or as adherents of Judaism. Ateek demonizes the Jews as Zionists and Israelis. The justification has changed. Jews are no longer attacked for their supposed opposition to Christianity and Christian society, but much of the very same discarded imagery remains. This imagery now reappears in a different, thoroughly politicized guise.

Ateek turns to Hebrew and Christian scriptures to furnish the anti-Jewish images for his accusations. In addition, he advances old, generic images of Jewish malevolence. His decision to employ language and imagery taken from the canonical religious texts of Judaism and Christianity for his criticism of the State of Israel, and for the Jewish people who support it, turns a contemporary, this-worldly, political conflict into a cosmic religious conflict, something that moderns try to avoid. Because of the long history of Christian demonization of Jews and Judaism, and the long history of Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Bible in polemics against the Jews, Ateek's religious orientation ends up producing anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish criticisms of Israel. In place of political criticisms of Israeli governmental practices, policies, decisions, and values, he moves the dispute to an entirely new level, yet one as old as Christian antisemitism itself. Much as earlier Jews were often scapegoated as the source of Western Christians' problems, namely—murdered Christian children, usury, the Black Plague, well poisonings and Host desecrations—contemporary Jews are singled out as the sole obstacle to peace for the entire region. Ateek goes to great lengths to do this, frequently relying on the most infamous Biblical opponents of God

as sources for his indictment. This includes identifying the government of Israel with Herod, the Caesars, and the Roman Empire.

Ateek assumes the mantle of the First Temple Prophets and condemns the State of Israel in like manner. We now know from two thousand years of experience that these verses gained a career and developed a life of their own. They became part of the tradition of the teaching of contempt for Judaism and its faithful. The adversus Judaeos tradition is a tradition that asserts like almost no other known to humankind that there is but one people lower in God's economy than any other people—the Jewish people.

Why, at this late stage in the Jewish-Christian encounter, would any church rely upon and identify as a source of inspiration and teaching, a man with such a retrogressive theology?

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*Note: This essay makes use of a published paper by a fine young scholar, Adam Gregerman, that appeared in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies.*