Waging Peace: Archbishop Desmond Tutu Delivers Sabeel Conference Keynote Address

By Michel Gillespie and Betsy Mayfield in the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND Tutu thrilled a thousand attendees of the Friends of Sabeel-North America (FOSNA) conference at Boston’s Old South Church on Oct. 27. Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. In his speech, Tutu made a stirring appeal to Jews to reject Israeli oppression of Palestinians and to negotiate in good faith a just resolution of the world’s largest, longest running, and most destabilizing refugee and human rights crisis.

The Nobel Peace Laureate placed Israel’s occupation of Palestine squarely in the context of the Hebrew prophetic and Jewish ethical traditions, comparing the struggle of Palestinians with that against apartheid in South Africa.

“God vindicated us,” Tutu declared. “Apartheid’s rulers bit the dust as all oppressors have done always, for this is a moral universe; right and wrong matter.

“Mine is a *cri de coeur,*” he continued, “a cry of anguish from the heart, an impassioned appeal to my spiritual relatives, the offspring of Abraham like me—please hear the call of your noble scriptures, of our scriptures.”

Tutu, 76, achieved worldwide acclaim as a leading opponent of apartheid in South Africa during the 1980s and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984. He serves as the Patron of Sabee International.

Tutu urged Jews to “deal with the oppressed, the weak, the despised compassionately, caring, remembering what happened to you in Egypt and much more recently in Germany. Remember and act appropriately. If you reject your calling, you may survive for a long time, but you will find that it is all corrosive inside and one day you will implode.”

Imam Mahdi Bray, executive director of the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation, addressed the conference on Oct. 26. As an African American who grew up in the South, he said, whose father was a lieutenant to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and whose home was firebombed in 1955 when he was five years old, he understands apartheid.

“When we come to the issue of apartheid, whether it is in South Africa, in America, or the Holy Land, there are three significant questions that are always asked,” said Bray. “The coward will ask, is it safe? Vanity will ask, is it popular? But conscience and God consciousness ask, is it right?”

“If we address the issue of global justice and peace, then we must address the issue of Palestine,” said Bray, recalling Dr. King’s 1967 declaration that “a time comes when silence is betrayal.”

Dr. Sara Roy, a senior research scholar at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies who has worked in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, has written about the economic, social and political
development of the Gaza Strip and U.S. foreign aid to the region. Roy addressed the opening session of the conference with an exploration and explication of Jewish experience.

“Why is it so difficult, even impossible, to accommodate Palestinians into the Jewish understanding of history?” she asked. “Why is it virtually mandatory among Jewish intellectuals to oppose racism, repression, and injustice almost anywhere in the world, and unacceptable—indeed, for some an act of heresy—to oppose it when Israel is the oppressor?”

She went on to call for a single universal standard for justice for all people, regardless of national and ethnic affiliations. “There can be no other way,” stated Roy. “If it is wrong to oppress and harm Israelis, it is just as wrong to oppress and harm Palestinians or any other people.”

Hillary Rantisi, director of the Middle East Initiative at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, introduced Rev. Canon Naim Ateek, founder of Sabeel. During the past five years, he noted, FOSNA has sponsored 21 regional conferences across the U.S. “In every conference we have condemned violence and terrorism, whether coming from Israel and its army or the extremist Palestinian groups,” said Ateek. “We have always declared that peace is knocking at our door. We believe that Israel can enjoy peace and security if and when it takes a good look at itself, recognizes the grave injustice it has committed against Palestinians, and implements international law.

“We believe that it is possible for Palestinians and Israelis to live in peace, side by side,” Ateek explained. “To this end we strive and we work. Tragically, the government of Israel is not listening to the voice of peace and reason. It is important to emphasize that the conflict back home is not a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It is between the forces of peace and justice in Israel and Palestine, and those of violence and domination in Israel and Palestine.”

“Today, the government of Israel is guided by a blind obsession for Palestinian land and by a deep desire to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians and force them to leave their territory,” said Ateek. “For quite some time even Israeli Jewish writers have been using the word apartheid to describe what Israel is doing,” said Ateek, who praised former U.S. President Jimmy Carter for his courage in using the term in the title of his controversial 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.

“Though many have called the Israeli occupation worse than the apartheid regime in South Africa, we are not here to quantify suffering,” said Ateek. “We are here to learn and understand what is happening under occupation, to confront racism, and to seek a strategy that can dismantle it through nonviolent means.”

FOSNA administrative officer Sister Elaine Kelly of Portland, OR, described the Boston conference as the organization’s largest and most successful ever. “We have had tremendous support from all around the country as a result of this conference,” she said. “Half of the participants came from outside Massachusetts, so it really turned out to be a national conference rather than a regional conference.”

Conference organizers noted that, even as they worked with the Boston chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which actively supported the conference, they ran into opposition from local
and national Zionist organizations, including the Boston area Jewish Community Relations Council, The David Project, and CAMERA.

“Much controversy was generated in the media because of the participation of Archbishop Tutu and the theme of apartheid,” Kelly said. “Two very influential pro-Israel Zionist groups based in Boston led the campaign to discredit Bishop Tutu, Naim Ateek and the Old South Church administration. I think the threats and name-calling backfired on them.”

“Attacking and demonizing someone like Archbishop Tutu by calling him an anti-Semite because he criticizes Israeli human rights abuses doesn’t change the fact that the occupation is wrong,” said Martin Federman, who co-chairs the Boston chapter of JVP. “Whatever name you give to it, it’s immoral, it’s illegal, and the world knows it.” Federman spoke at an Oct. 27 solidarity rally organized by JVP and the Massachusetts chapter of the American-Arab Anti-discrimination Committee in support of the FOSNA conference.

The solidarity rally coincided with the National Day of Action’s Boston regional demonstration anti-war march, which drew 10,000 people to Copley Square, including hundreds of the Sabeel conference and solidarity rally participants.

For more information visit <www.sabeel.org> and <www.fosna.org>.

—Michel Gillespie and Betsy Mayfield