

Ten ways Christians can criticize Israel that aren't antisemitic

Since October 7, many well-intentioned statements have undercut progressive Christians' moral high ground by invoking antisemitic tropes. It's an avoidable problem.

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In her book *Antisemitism*, historian and diplomat Deborah Lipstadt offers this definition: “An antisemite is someone who hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary.” When someone criticizes Jews more or more intensely than they would criticize someone else for the same conduct, this is a measure of their antisemitism.

We believe that many progressive Christian leaders have failed by this standard in their criticism of Israel over the war in Gaza following Hamas's horrific attacks on October 7.

Respected colleagues and friends have accused Israel of genocide—a trope akin to Holocaust inversion and deeply painful to those of us who have family trees more dead than alive. Others speak of apartheid in Israel—not just in the West Bank, where one might make a problematic case for it—even though Palestinian Israeli citizens comprise 20 percent of the population and serve in high office. We see antisemitism when Christian leaders label Israeli Jews “White colonialists” even though the Jewish people are indigenous to Israel and the majority of Israeli Jews are people of color who have returned to their ancestral homeland—one which some never left at all. We observe it in an excessive focus on the war in Gaza and relentless criticism of Israel to the exclusion of other countries.

Such antisemitic rhetoric about Israel is uniquely painful given Christianity's longstanding history of anti-Jewish hatred. Antisemitism as we know it today would not exist without Christianity and the early Christian leaders who began spinning a web of hate against those who did not wish to join a new religion. It would not exist without Martin Luther, who redoubled the hate and created many of the ideological preconditions for the Holocaust. Even this venerable publication has received credible [criticism](#) for denying the extent of the Holocaust as it was unfolding in Europe and undermining the efforts of American Jewish leaders to raise awareness and galvanize American intervention against it.

Yet, it is not a forgone conclusion that Christians and Jews must be stuck in a relationship of predator and prey, of sibling rivalry that with regularity grows into sibling hatred and even fratricide. More recent expressions of Christian philosemitism owe much to church leaders' efforts to draw on our common religious heritage for good. After an extensive process of internal reflection and dialogue with Jewish leaders, the Catholic Church took a sharp turn for the better with the landmark [Nostra Aetate](#) declaration in 1965, which officially banned antisemitism “directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” Perhaps most significantly, it dispelled the longstanding notion that “the Jews killed Jesus.” In 2023, The Lutheran World Federation issued a study document called [Hope for the Future](#), which builds on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's efforts to acknowledge Luther's virulent antisemitism and its 1994 statement affirming the church's “urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people.”

Still, the wounds of history remain fresh—especially the active participation of Christian religious leaders and institutions in the Holocaust, as well as subsequent outbursts of antisemitism in Europe and the Middle East in which Christian leaders have actively, and sometimes avidly, participated.

So, it is uniquely painful when progressive Christian leaders single out Israel for criticism. Such criticism comes with a context, and that context is filled with memories of dead members of our Jewish family. At the same time, when progressive Christians use antisemitic tropes, we do not wish to presume malice—although we fear that there may be more than a little of it coming from certain corners. We also acknowledge that there are Christian communities directly impacted by the war in Gaza—and Christian values at play when it comes to peacemaking and the very real suffering of civilians.

What's more, there are appropriate and even helpful criticisms to be made of the Israeli government, where current leaders recall US leaders from the recent past. We hope to provide some helpful language for making such criticism in a way that avoids antisemitic tropes, and therefore avoids harming the Jewish community or Christians' relationship with it. We hope to stem the tide of mutual alienation and antagonism and to bolster areas of collaboration and dialogue—even around the current conflict, which is breaking all of our hearts.

Here are ten statements critical of Israeli policy and leadership that we see as permissible and even helpful for Palestinians, Israelis, and the prospects for peace.

1. Benjamin Netanyahu must resign as prime minister. Israelis from the political left, right, and center have taken to the streets to demand as much. Some argue that he will go down as the worst Jewish leader in history for his failure to protect Israelis and for launching a war that has neither freed many hostages nor toppled Hamas's terrorist regime. Opposing Netanyahu is good for Palestinians and Israelis alike. Questioning Israel's right to exist strengthens the prime minister's claims that the world is against Israel—and that only he can stand up to the hate.

2. Israeli leaders have no plan. Battlefield commanders are stressing that they can either work to free Israeli hostages or focus on toppling Hamas. The Israeli military left the Gaza strip in 2005, and Hamas was voted into office (and then refused to leave) in 2006. The Israeli military had nearly two decades to prepare for contingencies. Yet there is no sign that it has a sense of direction or purpose, even

as it engages in fierce fighting in densely populated urban areas.

3. The Israeli army must do more to protect civilians. Its recent move to lower-intensity fighting and the use of ground troops shows that this can be done—and should have been done from the outset. It could have saved thousands of civilian lives by risking those of more Israeli soldiers. The army had a moral imperative to do so and failed to live up to it.

4. Aerial bombardment is devastating and results in an unnecessary number of civilian casualties. While Hamas is intentionally creating moral and tactical conundrums by using human shields and violence against civilians who seek safe passage away from active fighting, the Israeli military should still refrain from bombing within densely populated urban areas.

5. Israel needs to work with Egypt to ease the suffering of civilians in Gaza. The passage of aid to Gaza could be vastly expanded through better cross-border cooperation with Egypt, which controls one of the key entry points to Gaza. Israel and Egypt, which have a strong and long-standing peace agreement, must use it not only for the good of both states but also for the good of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

6. The Israeli government must curb settler violence in the West Bank. Since October 7, a minority of Jewish settlers have engaged in targeted violence against Palestinian civilians. This is unethical, counter to Jewish law and values, and part of a dangerously misguided pursuit of a messianic vision for the modern state of Israel to grow and encompass the entirety of the biblical land of Israel. These extremists need to be denounced not only for their abhorrent actions against Palestinians but also for dangerously misrepresenting the ideals of most Israeli Jews. They must be opposed by those who seek a Palestinian state and a secure Israeli state.

7. Israel should long ago have made efforts to remove settlements from the West Bank. Even now, doing so could strengthen the Palestinian Authority as credible brokers, reinforce both Palestinian and Israeli moderates, and make day-to-day life easier for Palestinians in the West Bank. It would also demonstrate that settlement expansion is not in line with the hopes of most Israelis.

8. Israel could do more to pursue peace. Following decades of marginalization and isolation by majority-Muslim countries, Israel now has full diplomatic and trade relations with key powerbrokers in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia is working to advance the normalization of relations as well. The Israeli government is morally

obligated to take these opportunities seriously and to change the course of its own history. Working to create a Palestinian state is an essential part of this—it's important not only for Palestinians but also in terms of Israeli self-interest.

9. Israel must help to create the preconditions for a Palestinian state. Other than the Kurds, the Palestinians are the largest people in the Middle East without a state of their own. While successive Palestinian leaders have rejected Israeli plans to give over nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza and to divide Jerusalem, Israel has not made day-to-day life tolerable enough in recent years to convince rising generations of Palestinians that it is serious about peace.

10. Israeli leaders must stop undermining the Palestinian Authority. Settler activity in the West Bank and hurtful rhetoric from Israeli political leaders are placing the PA in an increasingly untenable position. The marginalization of Palestinian moderates may have contributed to Hamas's rise in Gaza in the first place—and this should be avoided at all costs in the West Bank.

“Does your progressivism include Jews?” asks a 2017 *HuffPost* article by Mirah Curzer. It can and it should. (Disclosure: One of us, Stanton, is married to Curzer.) Progressive Christians have a moral obligation to ensure that their progressivism does include Jews, particularly given Christianity's long history of anti-Jewish polemics. Many well-intentioned words and actions have contributed to the [dramatic rise in antisemitic incidents and violence in the United States](#) since October 7, and they have undercut the moral high ground on which Christian progressives stand. These are avoidable problems for those who seek justice and peace in the Middle East and who do not seek to use the current war as a pretense for hate.

The ten statements above are but some of the many that Christian leaders can formulate in pursuit of peace and justice for Palestinians and Israelis alike. It is up to them to ensure that they do not wield support for one vulnerable group as a cudgel against another.