

Money, morals and Israel: An exchange: Demonizing Israel, whitewashing terrorism

by [Ira Youdovin](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

This response is the third part of a four-part exchange on the divestment policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The other three parts are:

[Vernon S. Broyles III's statement](#) of his position

[Barbara Wheeler's response](#) to Broyles

[Broyles's reply](#) to Wheeler and Youdovin

The PCUSA General Assembly's declaration of economic warfare against the state of Israel asserts that "the Occupation [is] at the root of evil acts committed against innocent people." This is the religious premise on which PCUSA's divestment campaign rests. The word "evil" is an exceedingly strong denunciation when used in a serious religious document. An evil act is an act that is contrary to God's will. Evildoers are those who defy God's law.

Significantly, the word "evil" appears nowhere else in the proposal. No Palestinian action, no matter how horrific, is categorized as evil. While there is a sentence condemning attacks on innocent people, including those of Palestinian suicide bombers, the proposal does not refer to these acts as "evil," and, incredibly, neither does it characterize them as terrorism. But if blowing up Israeli children on a Tel Aviv bus is not an evil act and a terrorist act, then what is it?

The two-pronged strategy of demonizing Israel while whitewashing Palestinian terrorism has long been a leitmotif running through official PCUSA documents, laying the groundwork for imposing divestment. Divestment is a powerful economic and political weapon that is legitimately deployed only in situations in which one side is clearly right and the other clearly wrong, as was the case with the white minority regime in South Africa. However, since a fair reading of the situation in Israel/Palestine reveals that it is by no means analogous to South Africa, anti-Israel forces within the PCUSA have had to fabricate a narrative in which Israel is the sole evildoer and Palestinians are innocent victims.

A prelude to divestment was presented to the 215th General Assembly (2003) in the form of an essay titled "A Historical Synopsis of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict." An outrageous document, with entire sections lifted almost verbatim from materials published by the Middle East Report and Information Project, a Washington-based think tank hostile to Israel, the Historical Synopsis blithely distorts provable facts, airbrushes out virtually all Palestinian flaws, and blames Israel for Palestinian failings that can be neither ignored nor denied.

To cite a few examples among many, the Historical Synopsis neglects to mention that the Jews accepted the 1947 UN partition resolution creating Jewish *and* Arab states, while the Arabs rejected it and launched a war of annihilation. It alleges that Israel has built "hundreds of settlements," when the actual number is approximately 160.

Most reprehensible is what the document says, or doesn't say, about Palestinian terrorism. It contains not one word about the genocidal ideologies openly espoused by Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian organizations which reject the very notion of a Jewish presence not only in the West Bank and Gaza, but anywhere in the Middle East.

In particular, its treatment of the PLO leaves the reader gaping open-mouthed in amazement: “The PLO, like many other resistant movements, engaged in *militant activities within* Israel” (italics mine). That is all it says! Deliberately omitted is the PLO’s infamous terrorism at the 1972 Munich Olympics, as well as its bloody history of airline hijackings, airport bombings and assorted acts of terrorism that randomly took the lives of innocent people, Jews and non-Jews, throughout the world. (Those interested in reading the Historical Synopsis will find it at www.PCUSA.org.)

Not surprisingly, this document was prepared by PCUSA’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the group that recently paid a courtesy call on Hezbollah terrorist leaders in Beirut, telling their hosts, “We cherish your statements that bring us closer to you.”

PCUSA’s approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict raises some deeply troubling questions:

- Can Presbyterian leaders turn a blind eye on Palestinian terrorism, as well as clearly documented history, and still be faithful to their own religious principles?
- At what point does the PCUSA cease being an authentic religious entity and become an apologist for demented killers who strap explosives to their bodies and go off to murder innocent men, women and children on school buses or in pizza parlors, or who are gathered for a Passover seder?

To these I add a third question, one that is intensely personal: Why does the aforementioned Historical Synopsis totally ignore the centrality of the land of Israel and Jerusalem to Jewish hopes, prayers and religious observance for millennia, casting Zionism as a mere political ideology derived from European colonialism and calculated to move victims of European anti-Semitism to “a homeland related to the ancient people of biblical Israel”? Yasir Arafat said much the same thing in denying Jewish historical claims to the Temple Mount.

How could a national church that I and many others of my generation looked to as a beacon for religious guidance and inspiration during the Vietnam era produce a document that so flagrantly dismisses Israel’s place in the history and spiritual life of my people?

Regrettably, Broyles concludes his article with the old canard about Jews being reluctant to criticize Israel. The truth is that Israel is a particularly energetic democracy. Government policy is hotly debated in the press and media, as well as in coffeehouses, cafés and living rooms. Similarly, American Jews are far from being of one mind on the Palestinian issue.

What Broyles fails to appreciate is that the near-unanimous Jewish opposition to divestment does not reflect a rejection of legitimate Palestinian aspirations. Opinion polls indicate that some 70 percent of American and Israeli Jews support the concept of a geographically significant and economically viable state on the West Bank and in Gaza, as does the Israeli government.

But divestment is not the best means for pursuing this objective. In many ways, it is the worst.

Shortly after the General Assembly adjourned, the PCUSA received an open letter from Rabbis for Human Rights, an Israeli organization that does important, often courageous work in defense of Palestinians’ rights both inside Israel and in the territories. It read, in part:

Like you we hate the occupation, condemn it and work for its speedy end in a peace accord. However, the occupation cannot be used to excuse the reawakening of demons. We are appalled that you conceptualize this occupation in the same one-sided terms that have been applied for so long by

Christian churches to the real or perceived sins of Jews. Your simplistic declaration is [both] inaccurate and inadequate to explain the situation in all its tragic moral complexity. [You ignore] the homicidal ideologies that have so sadly taken hold among some of our Palestinian neighbors, [as well as] attempts to destroy our country that transcend the occupation, and precede it by decades. . . .

You ignore the incontrovertible fact that this catastrophe is the product of many causes and that there is guilt enough to share between all parties. People of conscience must act in awareness that the singling out, magnifying and sanctifying of Jewish sins has always been at the core of the terrible evil that we know as anti-Semitism. Failing in this awareness, you cross a line that people of good conscience dare not cross.

The divestment initiative cannot be reversed until the General Assembly next convenes in June 2006. But the General Assembly Council has the power to declare a moratorium on implementing divestment when it meets in late March 2005. The Jewish people, together with the increasing number of Presbyterians who oppose divestment, will be watching to see if PCUSA has it within itself to cross back over that line.