

A survey of CofE Bishops reveals a moral vacuum on Israel and Palestine

(16 November 2023 with minor edits on Jan 6, 2024¹)

Background

This survey was planned by a coalition of ten Christian, Jewish, Muslim and secular groups² that were concerned about the position the Church of England had taken vis-à-vis Israel/Palestine under the leadership of Archbishop Justin Welby. It was executed by CAMPAIN (the Campaign against Misrepresentation in Public Affairs, Information and the News - www.campaign.org).

An [Open Letter of April 25th](#) raised a series of issues, but the most immediate concern was over Welby's denial of the existence of apartheid in Israel, as expressed [in his talk of September 6th, 2023](#), in St Martins-in-the-Fields, London. This placed him at odds with the views of late Archbishop Tutu, the Anglican Church of South Africa, renowned international and Israeli human rights organisations, Palestinian Christians and the United Nations.

The purpose of the survey was to ascertain whether other CofE bishops shared Archbishop Welby's opinion, and if so why.

What we did/methodology

Between the 2nd and the 6th October, CAMPAIN emailed 109 senior clerics on behalf of the coalition, using the standard letter (see Annex below). The clerics included two archbishops, 35 diocesan bishops, 65 suffragan bishops and seven retired bishops for whom we could find addresses. Each email contained an attached letter asking the bishop concerned whether s/he agreed with the assessment of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu's and other authorities: *that apartheid existed in Israel*. We also asked that if they did not agree with this assessment, they should state their reasons.

Significantly, we wrote to the Bishops before the violence that was shortly to erupt on October 7th in and around Gaza, and our question was solely about the polity (apartheid or otherwise) that existed prior to those violent events. However, given the scale of this violence and the publicity it gained, it could be expected to colour some of the responses.

In our analysis of responses below, we do not include the two Archbishops. We mailed them to make our actions transparent to them, but the purpose of the survey was to learn the views of diocesan and suffragan bishops.

Responses obtained

All but five of our letters to diocesan and suffragan bishops (i.e. 102 letters) appear to have gone through to their destination without a hitch. It is possible that some emails ended up in spam folders,

¹ We slightly edited this report to provide greater clarity over the numbers of bishops in our analysis. After checking our data, we needed to reduce the number of suffragan bishops by one. We also make clear that we were not including responses of the Archbishops in our analysis, though we had sent them the survey letter to ensure transparency in what we were doing. These changes in no way affect our conclusions.

² CAMPAIN, [Sabeel Kairos](#), Israeli Committee against House Demolitions ([ICAHD-UK](#)), [Jewish Network for Palestine](#), [Islamic Human Rights Commission](#), [Jewish Voice for Labour](#), [Muslim Association of Britain](#), [Convivencia Alliance](#), [Peacemakers](#) and Protecting Palestinian Families (c/o Sharen Green, Wimborne, Dorset, sharen_eappi@msn.com)

but our use of an address with a domain name (admin@campaign.org) greatly diminishes this possibility. In the case of 33 respondents, we obtained a formal acknowledgment or an automatic message confirming the message had been received.

Of the five letters we can confirm did not reach their destination, three were for suffragan bishops in the Chelmsford diocese (Barking, Colchester and Bradwell), one was for Bishop Igrave of Lichfield who is on sabbatical until December 18th, and the other one was for Exeter which is currently without a Bishop.

Fifteen bishops provided some sort of comment on our letter, for which we thank them – see Table 1 below. However, if we assume that 102 letters reached their destination, the response rate was about 14.7% and, as we shall see below, only four bishops answered the question about the existence of apartheid in Israel.

Bishop	Comment
Rachel Treweek, Gloucester	"remains committed to justice and peace in Israel-Palestine, not least through her connections with Embrace", but "would not be adding her name to the letter"
Jonathan Gibbs, Rochester	expressed deep concern about "the dreadful situation that is unfolding in Israel/Palestine", but would not be joining in any statements about the situation, as he believed these would inevitably be partial and quite possibly unhelpful.
John Thomson, Selby	the Bishops in the Diocese of York had made their position public in their 'Joint Statement on Violence in Israel and Gaza'. He later said: "I am not competent nor willing to make public statements about the history and possible futures of such a complex and contested reality particularly given the highly charged situation now prevailing".
David Williams, Basingstoke	said he was "in regular contact with the Reconciliation team", and that "our own response to Palestine and Gaza follows the lead of the Reconciliation team".
Ric Thorpe, Islington	"thank you for your email and letting me know about the work that you are doing - - -. More than ever, we need to pray".
Eleanor Sanderson, Hull	responded from South Africa where she had just paid her respects to the late Archbishop Tutu. She went on to say that our letter was very helpful in identifying more conversations that she needed to have as she continued "to serve in this part of our Communion". However, she was still relatively new to the CofE and had "not yet encountered any clear understanding of a shared position".
Jackie Searle, Crediton	"unable to comment at the present time", and refers us to the House of Bishops statement dated 31st October 2023.
Andrew Rumsey, Ramsbury	"I recognise the deep grievances on both sides of the current conflict and am a supporter of the work of Amos Trust in the region, of which you may be aware".
Martin Gorick, Dudley	"I share your desire for lasting peace in the Holy Land. Can I refer you to the statement made by the House of Bishops collectively today? "
James Grier, Plymouth	reluctant to make any kind of statement: "Having listened to so much in recent weeks I realise more and more how little I know and understand of such a complicated situation - - - I do believe that Palestinians have been and are being treated unacceptably badly and that the international response is not balanced or appropriate."
Retired Bishop Richard Llewelin	"I entirely agree with all you say in your letter to me - - - I am saddened by the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury seems unable to understand what the true situation in Israel and Palestine really is, and his refusal to contemplate seeing Israel as an apartheid state".
Retired Bishop Michael Doe	"As a Trustee of the Balfour Project, and an active member of Sabeel/Kairos, I am deeply concerned with these issues and would normally welcome most initiatives which seek peace with justice in Palestine and Israel. However, I fear that a frontal attack on the Archbishop, particularly isolating the apartheid issue, could be counter-productive. Some

	of us are working on other approaches which may be more likely to succeed. My other reason for not going public on your letter is that one of your supporters has circulated the letter as if it is supported by the Balfour Project". (Note: this was a mistake of Balfour Project staff, not ours).
Retired Bishop Bill Musk	"I did my doctoral dissertation (I was living in Egypt at the time) through the University of South Africa and visited the country to defend my thesis and sit my exams - in 1984. I was greatly saddened by the apartheid system still evidently in force then. I have never visited Israel but my observation from a distance would be that in various respects it looks as if the government there is in reality operating a form of apartheid".
Retired Archbishop George Carey	replied negatively, though his response suggests that he did not understand the question. Indeed, he wrote back angrily on October 22, treating the assertion of "Israeli apartheid" as if it were a justification for the killing carried out by Hamas on October 7 th . He appears not to have recalled that we wrote to him five days before that event.
Retired Bishop Michael Langrish	<p>He has been actively engaged with the Middle East and, particularly Israel/OPT, for forty years. He has been significantly concerned with the events recently unfolding in and around Gaza, and the responses, particularly in his capacity as Patron of three Charitable organisations that are actively engaged.</p> <p>He said "the language of apartheid needs to be used precisely and with great care. So there is a very significant difference between the Anglican Church in South Africa passing the blunt resolution "declaring Israel an Apartheid State" and the far more nuanced comments by e.g Kairos and Sabeel about the 'existence of Israeli apartheid'? The description of Israel as an 'Apartheid State' is – as I have discovered – too easily refuted by supporters of current Israeli policies as they note the very considerable distinction between how non-whites were treated in law and practice under the Apartheid regime and the status and experience of the Israeli Arab citizens of Israel. This then shuts down the necessary debate about the real issues involved. My own approach has to been to speak along the line of Israel having had a series of Governments who have pursued apartheid-like policies, particularly in regard to the OPT and contrary to their responsibilities under international law as an occupying power. This is not so easily dismissed and requires engagement".</p> <p>"In the present circumstances especially where, not just inflammatory but loose, language is daily adding to an appalling humanitarian crisis and tragic personal suffering, how important it is to avoid simplistic slogans, and to both speak and acts in ways that draw out the real issues that need to be urgently addressed, not least the very specific criminal actions (by any party) that are obstacles to both the short term relief of suffering and end to bloodshed, and the long term necessity to identify the building blocks that will make for peace built on justice and truth and beginning to offer hope where there is so much despair".</p> <p>"I attach for your interest a reflection for FHL that I wrote 24 hours after the Hamas attacks and which has now received wide currency". In the third paragraph of this document Bishop Langrish provides a poignant quotation about a "massive political (and) moral failure" on the part of the USA, the EU and the international community, in being "mostly content to maintain the status quo as long as it was mostly Palestinians that paid the price". Bishop Langrish goes on to say that "events such as those of this weekend don't occur in a vacuum - - -". He adds that "any realistic diplomatic process must also face and engage with other issues and concerns", including "Israel's need for confidence in long-term security and the genuine fears of many Jews - - -".</p>

Analysis of responses

The comments in Table 1 were provided by ten serving bishops, about 10.5% of the 95 diocesan and suffragan bishops to whom we had written, and five retired bishops, 71% of the seven to whom we had written. Four out of these five retired bishops tried to answer our question about Israeli apartheid, in marked contrast to the ten serving bishops, none of whom expressed an opinion. Several felt they were not qualified to do so, two referred us to other authorities within the Church, and one referred us to a House of Bishops statement about the recent Gaza war. Significantly, this statement did not discuss the context (apartheid or otherwise) in which violence had erupted.

The most important thing to note is that none of the 102 Bishops to whom we wrote provided a reasoned rebuttal to Archbishop Tutu et al.'s assessment of Israeli apartheid. One respondent (retired Archbishop Carey) rejected the term "Israeli apartheid" but provided no reasoning. His reaction appears to be rooted in the violent events that occurred five days after we wrote to him. One other bishop, Michael Doe, also reacted negatively claiming the letter was "a frontal attack on the Archbishop". As our letter never mentioned Archbishop Welby, he might have more accurately described it as "an implied criticism".

Two retired bishops, Richard Llewellyn and Bill Musk, affirmed the existence of apartheid in Israel/Palestine. Retired Bishop Michael Langrish provided a lengthy reply in which he described "Israel having had a series of Governments who have pursued apartheid-like policies" but he had problems with the description of Israel as an "Apartheid State" because he considers it allows supporters of Israel to raise objections and prevents engagement.

What should we expect of the Anglican hierarchy?

This is a question we need to answer before assessing the bishops' responses. There are two sub-questions here. Firstly, what is it realistic to expect of the Church hierarchy, given their lack of encyclopaedic knowledge and expertise on all topics? Secondly, are the non-Anglicans among us entitled to expect anything of the Church of England?

On the matter of realistic expectations

One cannot expect members of the Church hierarchy to take a view on all political issues, but there are some "priority issues" upon which we believe they should be able to opine. We suggest using the following criteria to distinguishing those priority issues:

- (i) The importance of the issues for human welfare and international peace, particularly in jurisdictions in which Christians are involved;
- (ii) Issues where the Church ought to be well-informed, due to its past and present involvement and witness;
- (iii) The topic is a relative "no-brainer", with an absence of "grey areas" that make it difficult to come down on one side or other of the argument, and;
- (iv) Powerful vested interests inhibit ordinary mortals from speaking out.

The Israel/Palestine topic clearly fulfils the first two of these criteria. It is a century-old political sore that has prevented peace, caused many fatalities and a massive toll in refugees/internally-displaced people. The CofE ought to be well-informed given that there have been Christians in Palestine since the time of Jesus, and there have been Anglican bishops there [since the first half of the nineteenth century](#). Indeed, the Church runs a range of institutions including hospitals and schools. Since the founding of Israel in 1948, Anglicans have witnessed the expulsions of Palestinians, the illegal

colonisation by Jewish settlers, and repeated bouts of violence. Moreover, many Anglicans have been able to observe developments through charitable and human rights work in organisations like the Amos Trust, Sabeel-Kairos, Embrace the Middle East and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme (EAPPI).

The Israel/Palestine topic also fulfils the third criterion. [The 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#) provides a clear definition of apartheid, and there are many expert testimonies about its existence in Israel/Palestine. This should have allowed many of the respondents to our survey to say whether apartheid exists, or does not exist, in Israel/Palestine.

It also fulfils the fourth criterion. Ever since the Roman persecutions “the way of the cross” has meant standing up in the face of overwhelming force. When writing to the bishops we highlighted the way some clerics and religious groups fiercely opposed the cruelty and slavery of European colonialism. Indeed, this can be traced back to the activity of Spanish clerics [early in the 16th century](#).

What are the non-Anglicans and non-Christians entitled to expect of the CofE?

To put this another way, is this simply an internal matter that practising Anglicans must sort out among themselves?

We would emphatically assert that all British people and UK residents are entitled to question the Church hierarchy on this issue. The members of our coalition, including both Christian and non-Christian groups, support Jesus’s teachings about the inherent and equal value of all human life. To put it in simple terms, we expect the established Church to adopt an ethical stance over contentious issues, and do “what it says on the tin”. We are moreover conscious that the CofE enjoys a privileged position at the heart of a state that includes Christians and non-Christians alike, and it can use this to advance Christ’s message.

This is the basis upon which we draw our conclusions.

Conclusions

Our most important finding is that none of the 105 Bishops to whom we wrote provided a reasoned rebuttal to Archbishop Tutu and other authorities’ assessment about the existence apartheid. None of them argued in favour of Archbishop Welby’s strongly pro-Israel viewpoint on the matter.

At the same time, it is disappointing that none of the 94 serving diocesan and suffragan bishops to whom we wrote were willing to express a view either for or against the existence of apartheid in Israel. We understand that some felt insufficiently knowledgeable to comment, but given the Church’s background knowledge of the situation in Israel/Palestine, we find this zero rate wholly unacceptable. Some of our coalition members reacted with indignation, with one Anglican member of our coalition saying:

I am shocked and ashamed of the lack of positive response from our leaders - "mealy-mouthed" is spot on. Some felt unqualified to comment - really? Our leaders? What are they for if they can't comment on such an important issue? You don't need a doctorate in political science to call a spade a spade.

Another member remarked as follows:

None of the respondents even mentioned the reports from the major human right's organisations or other supporting material that we sent to them for consideration in addition to the statements of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the historic resolution just passed by Anglicans in South Africa.

Suggestions for the future

While we question the position of Archbishop Welby on Israeli apartheid, and the silence of the Church hierarchy, we believe there is scope for a positive outcome. We do not oppose the existence of an established Church but feel it needs to provide an ethical challenge to the most obvious abuses of power in the UK body politic.

One of the worst areas of abuse is the way Britain has stood by and tacitly supported Israel's oppression of the Palestinians since 1948. On innumerable occasions, the Church could have spoken up in protest, but for the main part, it has chosen to go with the flow of British Government policy. Its behaviour over recent years has been particularly distressing. It has ignored the pleas of Palestinian Christians in the Kairos Palestine document of 2009 and the Cry of Hope in 2020. It has failed to speak out robustly about the far-fetched "Christian Zionism" doctrines that do untold damage to the prospects for Middle Eastern peace. By backing Chief Rabbi Mirvis's "warning about Jeremy Corbyn" on grounds of antisemitism ([see here](#)), Archbishop Welby echoed accusations against Jeremy Corbyn and supporters, without solid evidence, in the run-up to the general election of 2019. Moreover, the House of Bishops adopted [the discredited IHRA working definition](#) of antisemitism, which serves as a tool for smearing those who criticise Israel as antisemitic, thereby tending to stifle freedom of speech (as acknowledged, with concern, by its initial author Kenneth Stern).

In recent months Archbishop Welby has gone further. In his St Martins-in-the-Fields speech of September 6th, he denied the existence of apartheid in Israel/Palestine despite all the evidence. We also believe his reaction to the violence since October 7th has provided the Prime Minister with moral cover, after the latter had given Israel "unqualified support" in fighting Hamas.

There are other "priority issues" on which we believe the Church of England could provide invaluable moral advocacy. One of the greatest problems that Britain faces is that our mainstream media often fails to accurately report the news. It generally sets the boundaries of acceptable discourse, and this often reduces the scope for rational evidence-based debate. This was most memorable with several newspapers' endorsement of the "dodgy dossier" used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and it remains a constant feature of reporting on Israel/Palestine and alleged antisemitism, among other topics.

The problem of media misconduct came to a head with [the phone-hacking scandal](#) that achieved notoriety in 2011. It illustrated some of the worst aspects in British public life, whereby phone hacking served the purpose of "kompromat", i.e. it placed newspaper conglomerates in a position of power over public figures fearing exposure. At the same time, the episode brought forth heroic efforts to regulate the press through the recommendations of Justice Leveson in 2012. However, in 2018, the Government reneged on the all-important second part of the Leveson recommendations.

Now, the Government has announced plans to repeal "section 40" of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, a key part of Justice Leveson's recommendations, a move [the Hacked Off Campaign](#) describes as "a cynical attempt to bribe the newspaper owners in advance of the next election". Bishops in the House of Lords supported reform in 2013 and spoke in favour of section 40, so we would now recommend they take a close look at Government plans that feature in the forthcoming "Media Bill". By taking a proactive stance on this issue, Church leaders could play a crucial role in opening the media to pro-Palestinian voices, including non-Zionist Jewish voices, who find themselves almost entirely silenced.

Annex: The survey instrument - standard letter to the bishops



Time to end Misrepresentation

The Right Revd XXX
Bishop of YYY
by email

2 November 2023

Dear Bishop XXX

The Church of England and Israel/Palestine

We are writing on behalf of a group of organisations concerned about where the Church of England stands vis-à-vis the situation in Israel/Palestine.

We come from different faith perspectives but we all value the Church for embodying considerable moral authority at the heart of our country's public affairs. It exercised this authority when it led the campaign against the slave trade (1787-1807) and, more recently, when it opposed apartheid in South Africa.

We are sure you agree that today, finding a just resolution in Palestine is among the greatest of the challenges confronting us and that people of faith have a crucial role to play. Like the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu (cited below), we believe that the injustices faced by the Palestinian people will only end when the present oppressive policies of Israel are challenged.

We are therefore approaching you to seek your reassurance on the following points:

Firstly, we hope you are aware of [Archbishop Tutu's statement](#) following a visit to Israel/Palestine nearly ten years ago in which he described the Palestinian experience as familiar to all black South Africans who were corralled and harassed and insulted and assaulted by the security forces of the apartheid government. Shortly before his death, [Archbishop Tutu](#) reiterated his characterisation of the Israeli state as practising the crime of apartheid against Palestinians and his support for the international movement of boycott, sanctions and divestment (BDS) as a peaceful means of opposing Israeli colonisation.

And just last week, the Provincial Standing Committee of the [Anglican Church in South Africa](#) passed an historic resolution "declaring Israel an Apartheid State". [Archbishop Thabo Makgoba](#) observed in a subsequent statement, "*When black South Africans who have lived under apartheid visit Israel, the parallels to apartheid are impossible to ignore. If we stand by and keep quiet, we will be complicit in the continuing oppression of the Palestinians.*"

Please let us know if you accept their assessment. If you do not, it would be helpful to know your considered reasons.

Secondly, are you aware of reports from the [United Nations](#), prestigious human rights bodies ([Amnesty](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#)), Israeli NGOs ([B'tselem](#), [ICAHN](#) and others), Palestinian Christians ([Kairos](#)) and a prominent ecumenical source ([Sabeel](#)) about the existence of Israeli apartheid? Again, if you reject these conclusions, knowing your reasons would be helpful.

We are well aware that, as a Bishop, you have many other pressing issues to address. However, we believe the Church of England has a vital prophetic responsibility to respond unambiguously and vigorously to the worsening injustices faced by Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim. We therefore hope that your responses to our enquiries will lead to a wider discussion within the Church on how best to further justice and peace in Israel/Palestine.

We shall be most grateful for your response as we wish to make the letter public at the beginning of November together with some, or all, of the responses we receive. We look forward to hearing from you.










In peace,

Jonathan Coulter

Secretary of CAMPAIN

Bromley, UK (mobile number provided)

on behalf of the following organisations:

1. The Campaign against Misrepresentation in Public Affairs Information and the News (CAMPAIN)	
2. Sabeel-Kairos	
3. The Israeli Committee against Home Demolitions, UK (ICAHN-UK)	
4. Jewish Network for Palestine (JNP)	
5. Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC)	
6. Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL)	
7. Muslim Association of Britain (MAB)	
8. Convivencia Alliance	
9. Peacemakers	
10. Protecting Palestinian Families (c/o Sharen Green, Wimborne, Dorset, email sharen_eappi@msn.com Tel. 01202 693837)	