



# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

Vol. I, No. 6, October 1, 2002

*A Middle East View by Mennonite Church Liaison,  
Glenn Edward Witmer*

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*“One out of every five humans,  
each of whom Christ calls us to love as we love ourselves,  
is a Muslim.”*

*Rev. Alex Awad, Bethlehem Bible College*

*“...some actions—like bombing a disco or a bus,  
or like holding 3.5 million people under occupation for 35 years—  
are morally unacceptable under any circumstances.”*

*Israeli soldier*

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## *~MY VOICE ...*

*The dishonesty of selective reporting to change the meaning and impact of a story,  
must caution all of us, especially in areas of politics and religion.*

## *Weighing the Evidence—a Balancing Act*

I am a Libra—born in October, under the symbol of the Scales, or Balance. The ancient myths and forecasting that surround the astrology industry do not interest me any more, but I remember a book 30 years ago in which the author described the identifying characteristics of the various signs of the zodiac. “Don’t think that Libras are necessarily well-balanced all the time,” she wrote. “Think how weigh scales work: when something is placed on one side, they tilt that way. Then when something is put on the other, they swing to the opposite side...” I was feeling crushed and embarrassed at this point. “But,” she redeemed herself, “once it’s all piled on both sides, they soon stop swinging and come to rest—completely balanced!”

Not too scientific or accurate, I suppose; but the image entered my mind again this month as the political charges and counter charges piled up articles, reports, speeches, and documentaries trying to analyze the Middle East crisis. There are all kinds of ‘experts’. [I am not one of them!] How is one supposed to know what to think? Is anyone right? Earlier articles in this space have considered the challenges and dangers we face in reading or listening to the news without knowing who is reporting, and what political or religious agenda colors their canvas. The best approach is to be open to views from many sides rather than choose only one source for information, since trust in any single source—news channel, daily paper, or televangelist—is problematic. We do not know their motives.

This month we listened to a number of new voices, including more Palestinian Muslim and Christian sources. My travels included participation with an international group that opted to visit several Palestinian areas, to hear those voices directly. More than 30 people discussed new ways of communicating the gospel message during this first annual ‘Young Theologians Conference’ based at

St. George's Cathedral. In addition to allowing Christians from all over the world to see the conditions facing Palestinians, it gave local Arab churches a sense of encouragement and support. The group traveled to military sites, churches, community service centers, and hospitals in Gaza, Ramallah, Jericho, and other West Bank locations. We witnessed bombed-out buildings in Gaza and heard first-hand accounts of curfews, economic fallout and humiliation that have come with Israeli occupation.

*Beginning with this issue there are accompanying photographs*—not in the body of this letter, but on the website.

*“You will see disturbing graffiti on damaged portions of a bombed building with a piercing message for us Westerners.”*

The old maxim, *a picture is worth a thousand words*, remains so true, especially when describing the indescribable, and reporting the depths of emotions and hopelessness that people try to communicate in their stories. Four pictures from Gaza that I would like you to see are on our website, along with back issues of *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*, at [www.mennonitechurch.org](http://www.mennonitechurch.org).

You will see disturbing graffiti on damaged portions of a bombed building, with a piercing message for us Westerners.” The calm, innocent faces of 16-year-old Muslims, Leena and Sameh, mask the emotional pain and suffering they have suffered with their families, and with the children who are part of YMCA summer activities developed to distract them from the horrors that surround them. Most troubling of all are two paintings by Gaza children just reaching their teens, with images of their worst—real-life—nightmares. [*Perhaps you can use the web photos in a group discussion where you work or study.*]

*Balanced reporting does not always mean having equal amounts of space devoted to each side of an argument*, but rather by making sure that a range of voices is heard. And that the *whole* report on an event is published, not just the parts we prefer. One very right-wing American supporter of the Israeli government sends out regular reports about the developing crisis situation. After the most recent bombing in Tel Aviv, she ran a finger-pointing article that began, “Bomb Breaks Six-week Calm,” and described the horrifying facts of the Palestinian suicide killing of a number of innocent Israelis. So now

the questions before us are: Was there a suicide bombing with innocent lives taken? Yes! Is that horrifying? Yes! Is her report true?...Well, what is truth?

*I believe she misled the reader—perhaps deliberately!* It is true that her reported points are factually correct, but what are the implications when you, the reader, hear *the rest of the story*, the story that picks up on the part of the headline about the ‘break in the six-week calm’? In fact, the bombing did *not* come after six weeks of calm at all, but at the end of a particularly bloody period in which dozens of Palestinians, most of them unarmed civilians, and a large number of them children, had been killed and injured by Israeli occupation forces.

*During that ‘calm’—for Israelis, that is—69 Palestinians were killed, among them 13 children and 9 Palestinians assassinated by the Israeli army for presumed guilt of terrorist acts.*

No trial, no defense, only instant death. No international law justifies this kind of behavior from a civilized country, one receiving almost unquestioned support from the world’s most powerful Christian society. In effect, the definition of “calm” or a “lull in violence” inherent in her account is: ‘*only Palestinians are being killed.*’ Why wasn’t her report balanced?

*With the young theologians we visited a bombed section of Gaza.* The website picture of the destroyed building with the graffiti referred to above is of the remains of the family apartment of Sheikh Salah Shehadeh, long wanted by the IDF.\* *Did it not matter that in order to get him in the sights of their airborne weapons [without due process] the Israeli pilot would also blow up 14 others in those apartments, including nine young children who have never known ‘calm’ during their childhood?*

Does that matter to us as people who pride ourselves on ideals of fair play, on honesty in government, and on Christian understanding of what is right and wrong? Is media reporting of misinformation OK—as ‘freedom of speech’? Surely the media must be consistent in their attempts to weigh both sides of the issue before claiming to give readers a balanced judgment:

*Like the scales of justice!* —GEW

\*see page 5 of the August *MennoLetter*, No. 4, for this story. To view photographs mentioned, see [www.mennonitechurch.ca](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca)

## *Grave UN Economic Report on Gaza & West Bank*

*The catastrophic effects of the illegal Israeli military occupation* of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are reported in crude economic statistics in the (London) *Financial Times*, drawn from an early copy of a UN report: the unemployment rate in the West Bank rises to much as 63% under Israeli imposed lockdown with more than half of the population living in poverty on less than \$2 a day. In the Gaza Strip the situation is even worse with 70% of the population living in poverty. The report estimates that the monetary losses caused to the Palestinian population by the economic blockade that has been operative (at various grades of intensity) since shortly after the *Al Aqsa* intifada began two years ago, run at about \$6 million a day, a cumulative total of more than \$3 billion. (This figure is still an underestimate of the costs since it does not include wide-ranging damage to physical infrastructure caused by the IDF.)

As a result, international aid to Palestine is now directed overwhelmingly to short-term humanitarian goals at the expense of long-term investment. This situation has three implications: first, the Israeli government has succeeded in shifting the costs of occupation onto the international community in what amounts, in effect, to another form of subsidy for Israeli policies labeled illegal under UN resolutions with which Israel refuses to comply; second, any focus on a ‘humanitarian crisis’ deflects attention away from the causes of the crisis—in this case almost completely the direct result of Israeli policy; third, ordinary Palestinians are deprived not only of the right to collective self-determination, but even of the right to direct their own individual economic affairs at the most basic level, by earning a living. —*Jewish Peace News*.

For a preliminary version of the report see: <http://www.escwa.org.lb/information/press>

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*Christian Peacemaker Team members are usually witness to confrontation and injustice,  
but with the Muslim call to prayer, an act of redemption occurs...*

### *“A Powerful, Nonviolent Act of Civil Disobedience!”*

*It was Friday. In Hebron the Muslim call to prayers sounded.* Men were hurrying to get to the place of prayer. As usual, the Israeli soldiers stopped many of the men at the Beit Romano checkpoint, to check IDs. About thirty men were being detained—men on their way to the Glassmaker’s Mosque around the corner from the CPT apartment. The soldiers spoke abruptly to the men, but seemed less curt than the observer had seen before.

As he watched and took notes, an interesting thing developed. A few of those detained talked with one of the soldiers, fluent in Arabic. The soldier allowed a young boy to run off in the direction of the mosque. After a short time, the boy returned, laden with prayer rugs. A local storeowner, who hadn’t yet closed his shop, brought out a bucket of water. The detained men cleansed themselves at the bucket of water, doing their ablutions, and then moved to the porch across the street. One of the thirty men led the rest in their prayers—right there, directly under the Israeli lookout post!

These men would not be kept from their prayers, even though the soldiers had stopped them from getting to the mosque. As the observer watched what was happening before his eyes, he wrote, “What a powerful, nonviolent act of civil disobedience! Did the soldier realize what he had ‘allowed’ to happen?”

— *Jim Roynon in a CPT observer report*

*“So why don’t we all refuse? What if everyone refuses?  
Where would we all be then?” I couldn’t help thinking of Bertolt Brecht’s famous  
(though misinterpreted) line: “Stell Dir vor, es kommt Krieg und keiner geht hin”:*

## *“Imagine there is a War, and Nobody goes!”*

*In his periodic column for antiwar.com, academic and journalist Ray HaCohen describes  
the discussion after a public talk given by the Israeli soldiers refusing to serve in the occupied territories.  
Called “Fighters’ Talk”, it refers to a book from just after the 1967 war which exposed the first ideological cracks—  
hesitations, questions, criticism—of soldiers who had occupied the territories in the six days of that war. Excerpts:*

One of the participants in the old Fighters’ Talk was on the stage. Comparing the two occasions, he said, “Things were much simpler in the old days. We were fighting against regular armies—of Jordan, Egypt, Syria—and not against civilians. The Palestinians were there, the war was in their territories, but they were not fighters, not terrorists, not the enemy. Whether we believed holding the territories was desirable or not, none of us thought we should settle there.” Compare this to the present reality, where a quarter of a million Israeli settlers live on Palestinian soil, taking Palestinian land, water, freedom, where an army fights a civilian population with no state, no defense, no rights, no dignity.

Another refuser described the mission that made him refuse. “Last year we were ordered to destroy a Palestinian house in the territories because of a balcony added to it without a permit. It was a clear Israeli provocation: it had been expected to develop into a battle, and it did.” He described dragging crying children out of bed, wondering how long it would take before they become suicide-bombers. He described how, after a cease-fire order was given, firing went on. Another army unit that happened to be in the area kept shooting, ignoring the order. The battle ended with six Palestinians wounded and one soldier shot in his leg. The next day he heard it all on the radio: “During a military operation, our soldiers were attacked and returned fire.”

*“One refuser said that some actions—like bombing a disco or a bus,  
or like holding 3.5 million people under occupation for 35 years—  
are morally unacceptable under any circumstances.”*

Later on, an officer who is an *opponent* of refusal, and who had participated in the same operation, completed the picture. He confirmed the scenes of crying little children in the middle of the night. He got an order to dismantle the house because of illegal building. There was no military reason for it: no one ever used the building for shooting, it never caused any trouble. Its only sin was having no permit. That’s why the three-story house had to be dismantled, *shortly after midnight*, by a bulldozer accompanied by his entire unit. “So why didn’t you refuse,” someone in the audience asked. I was naive, he said, I wasn’t thinking. Someone from the audience interrupted: “Dismantling a house...does this mean destroying it?” Yes, he said, that is what it means. “So why do you say ‘dismantle?’” He could not answer. But he kept saying ‘dismantle.’ —*A Jewish Voice for Peace*

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*“Now is not the time for the Jewish community leaders to publicly attack Israel ...*

*...or its policies with respect to the Palestinians. Israel should bar the media from entry into territories involved in the present demonstrations, accept short term criticism of the world press for such conduct, and put down the insurrection as quickly as possible—overwhelmingly, brutally, and rapidly. The proposed international peace conference, as presently conceived by Foreign Minister Peres may lead to “disaster for Israel.”—Henry Kissinger, June 1988 Harper’s Magazine report on the advice Kissinger gave to Jewish American Leaders in January 1988, two months after the first intifada started.*

## *Emergency Humanitarian Aid for Nablus*

*Mennonite Central Committee is joining with several other Christian organizations* (World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, Pontifical Mission for Palestine, Caritas, Lutheran World Federation, International Christian Committee, and the International Orthodox Christian Charities) in an emergency humanitarian intervention in the besieged city of Nablus in the north of the West Bank. Nablus has been under nearly constant curfew for over three months, and all aspects of life have ground to a halt. The historic Old City has been in ruins since the invasions of April and June, with water cut off in many parts of the old city. Unemployment is well over 60% and more than 40% are under the poverty line. Even the few families with disposable income left sometimes run short of food, fearing to leave home under curfew.

MCC and the other Christian organizations will be working together with Nablus' National Emergency Committee. The committee will purchase basic foodstuffs (rice, lentils, oil) and hygiene supplies (soap, sanitary napkins) locally in Nablus and distribute them to 2700 families. Each carton will last a family of seven for three weeks. —*Alain Epp Weaver, MCC Palestine Update*

## *Discovery of Temple Ritual Vessel Newest Archeological Treasure*

A Roman-era limestone container found near the Galilee city of Zippori, a few kilometers from Nazareth, provides the first evidence that a significant Second Temple ritual lasted well beyond the destruction of the holy site in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The large, decorated vessel was recently uncovered in excavations conducted under the auspices of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem Institute of Archaeology, led by Dr. Ze'ev Weiss. This kind of vessel was used by Jewish priests, mainly in Jerusalem, for Temple rituals such as sacrifices, until the destruction of the Temple. The container was used for storing 'purified' water since, under Jewish law, stone vessels were not considered to acquire impurities as did other vessels, like those made of clay.

According to the university statement, the finding is the first vessel of its kind found in Galilee. It suggests that these vessels were used by Jews throughout the Galilee in the third and fourth centuries C.E., contrary to prior belief. The vessel was alongside remains of a farming community, another finding that contradicts earlier assessments that Jews did not live in such agricultural settings in Galilee during that period.

## *~ OTHER VOICES...*

*President Jimmy Carter*

### *The Troubling New Face of America*

Fundamental changes are taking place in the historical policies of the United States with regard to human rights, our role in the community of nations, and the Middle East peace process—largely without definitive debates. Some approaches have understandably evolved from quick and well-advised reactions by President Bush to the tragedy of Sept. 11, but others seem to be developing from a core group of conservatives trying to realize long-pent-up ambitions under the cover of the proclaimed war against terrorism. Formerly admired almost universally as the preeminent champion of human rights, our country has become the foremost target of respected international organizations concerned about these basic principles of democratic life. —END

*Rev. Alex Awad*

# Muslims are our Neighbors

*In his sermon at the East Jerusalem Baptist Church two weeks ago, Rev. Awad, a Palestinian Methodist minister, and lecturer at Bethlehem Bible College, focused on the vital role of Christians to intercede before God on behalf of our neighbors, in whatever society we live—Jewish, Arab, or Christian. In this earlier article, he challenged Christian stereotypes of Muslims, urging a return to Christ’s teachings.*

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*A high-spirited televangelist stands before a crowd of thousands.* He knows the very words that will bring a thunderous applause from the crowd that packs the stadium. Beside him stands an Israeli official who he is equally anxious to impress.

With high evangelistic fervor, he launches a verbal attack on Islam and the founder of the Islamic faith. Then he ends his statement with the highest praise for the State of Israel.

His words sound like music to his listeners’ ears. He feels good about his rhetoric; so do his guests and his fired-up audience.

*“...a wave of anti-Muslim feeling has taken over much of America and is now spreading like wild fire among Evangelical circles...”*

However, in this age of advanced communications, the televangelist’s remarks also reach the homes of the many Muslims who live with us on this planet, and it should be noted that they do not feel so good about the messages they are getting. In fact, most Muslims in Indonesia, Palestine, Morocco, and the United States—just to name a few countries—are wondering why Evangelical Christians in America are so zealously bashing their faith, and this is a question that should concern us as well.

Since September 11, 2001, a wave of anti-Muslim feeling has taken over much of America and is now spreading like wild fire

among Evangelical circles there and in other countries.

Officials of respected Evangelical denominations and presidents of esteemed Christian organizations have joined the new trend. Some are publicly insulting Islam and its founder, while others are attacking the Koran and those who follow in its path.

Christians in general, and Evangelicals in particular, would do well to stop and think about where this crusade may be leading us and how it will impact Christian-Muslim relationships around the world. Evangelicals would also do well to consider carefully whether their public, rhetorical war against Muslims would advance or hinder the cause of Christ throughout the Muslim world.

Furthermore, Christians might also consider taking a fresh look at the history of Muslim-Christian interactions throughout the last 14 centuries before waving a banner in the current anti-Muslim war of words.

*“The Church sanctioned the killing of Muslims and other so-called infidels and heretics. Muslim men, women, and children were butchered in great numbers.”*

During the Middle Ages, Pope Urban II, campaigned to unite the various competing armies of Christian Europe in a crusade to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims. The

Pope blessed the Crusades and the brave fighters of Europe joined to fight what they perceived to be the enemies of God.

The church sanctioned the killing of Muslims and other so-called infidels and heretics. Muslim men, women, and children were butchered in great numbers. The Crusaders also killed many Jews and great numbers of non-Latin Christians.

*But the sword of Islam turned against the invading armies,* and most of the crusaders never returned to see their homelands again. They killed and were slaughtered in the name of Christ, all the while deeming that they were fighting for Christ and for His church.

*“... the Crusades created deep wounds in Muslim-Christian relations that have yet to be healed.”*

After 88 years of unspeakable bloodshed, the Muslims recaptured Jerusalem. A century later, they retook the rest of the Holy Land, bringing an end to the Crusades. However, the Crusades created deep wounds in Muslim-Christian relations that have yet to be healed.

*Today’s rhetoric of hate* against Islam clears the path for tomorrow’s wars against Islamic nations. When our preachers, teachers, TV evangelists, and politicians condition us to hate Muslims, they prepare us to kill Muslims or to watch their

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slaughter without having feelings of guilt, pity or remorse. Before getting caught up in the spirit of the season and joining the crusade of attacking Muslims, American Christians today need to learn what Middle Eastern and European Christians learned centuries ago. The lesson is simple: Live in peace with your Muslim neighbors and they will live in peace with you; oppress them and they will fight back. *Even if we believe or assume that Islam is evil, are we called to “repay evil for evil” or “overcome evil with good”?* (Romans 12:17-21)

I lived most of my life as a member of a small Christian community within a large Islamic population. The Church that I now pastor in East Jeru-salem is located in a predomin-antly Muslim neighborhood.

I know from first-hand experience and from daily contacts with Muslims, that most Muslims do not hate Christians. Most Muslims have nothing to do with terrorism. The radical Muslim factions, who are involved in militant acts against Israel or its allies, are Muslims who are driven more by political reasons than religious agendas.

*“...they turned to non-violent resistance and violent uprisings (intifada), all to no avail. In their utter frustration, some of them turned to radical Islamic movements.”*

Palestinians, for example, wanted for years to be rid of the Israeli occupation of what they perceive as their homeland. They

appealed to the United Nations and the UN failed them. They appealed to the superpowers and to Arab states who also failed them. Alternately, they sought the help of more than a thousand peace conferences, but these did not stop the confiscation of their land and the denial of their human rights.

During their struggle, they turned to non-violent resistance and violent uprisings (*intifada*), all to no avail. In their utter frustration with all options, some of them turned to radical Islamic movements. As a last resort the cry became: “Islam is the answer.”

*“If we want to find the enemy, we must look within us rather than at Islam and Muslims.”*

Islamic movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah are relatively new in the long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, most Muslims do not subscribe to these movements. Moreover, we err greatly if we insist on seeing all Muslims in the light of the bloody crimes of September 11 or in view of the dreadful suicide bombings on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

*If we want to find the enemy, we must look within us rather than at Islam and Muslims.* The enemies of the United States and the Western world are found mainly *within* the United States and within the Western world. Greed, pride, hypocrisy, racism, moral corruption, xenophobia and social injustices are our worst enemies.

These are the sins that make us hate, humiliate, kill, starve whole nations and pollute our planet. For example, for over half a

century Arabs and Muslims have been pleading with the West for a just resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead of responding fairly, we allowed domestic pressures and lobby groups to steer our foreign policy in supporting one side of the conflict against the legitimate rights of the other side, with disastrous consequences.

*Instead of promoting justice*, our intervention became a factor in complicating and worsening the situation and hindering the cause of peace. Quite often, the arrogance of governments in the West and their unjust policies in the Middle East are the fuels that inflame Islamic fundamentalists.

*One out of every five humans is a follower of the Muslim faith.* One out of every five humans, each of whom Christ calls us to love as we love ourselves, is a Muslim. Attacking Islam or hating Muslims will not only hinder the cause of Christ in the world, but it will also endanger the lives of Christians who live as minorities in the Islamic world.

The good news is that we do have a criterion to guide our path in our treatment of our Muslim neighbors. We find this criterion in the example and teachings of our Lord. As we allow His message of love, forgiveness, and humility to shine through us before our Muslim neighbors, they will, as Christ said: “...see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

*Whether we live at peace with our Muslim neighbors or not depends as much on us as on them.*

[Reprinted with permission]

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*“Belligerent and divisive voices now seem to be dominant in Washington, but they do not yet reflect final decisions of the president, Congress, or the courts. It is crucial that the historical and well-founded American commitments prevail: to peace, justice, human rights, the environment, and international cooperation.”*—Jimmy Carter

*“It was the Germans, so-called Christians, who had slaughtered the Jews—and then what happened? Christian countries such as Britain encouraged the Jews to take over Palestine to solve their problems in Europe. And when they got there, how did they treat the Arabs who had been hospitable to them for centuries? They drove them from their land and killed them as ruthlessly as they themselves had been killed. It was deeply unjust.” –The Muslim News*

## ~ YOUR VOICE...

*Feedback is welcome, especially as it helps us determine subjects of reader interest.*

*The following excerpts represent the range of views—space does not allow complete letters to be used.*

*The first two comments stake out the two main positions arising from the article on page 3 of the September issue of MennoLetter, “The Covenant Between God and the Jewish People is Eternal.”*

“Allow me to comment on your quote from the Rev. Thomas Oden on evangelism of Jews: ‘What I would like to see is Jews becoming good Jews, and let God do the rest.’ That seems to me to be a denial of the very essence of our Christian faith, namely, that as followers and witnesses of Jesus Christ, we try to cooperate with God in leading all people, Jews and Gentiles, to faith in Christ and make disciples of Christ. Isn’t that statement a denial of the mission of Christ Himself? The Apostle Paul’s great passion was that all Jews and all Gentiles be saved through faith in Christ.”

[Canada]

“In my experience with ethnic Christians [which includes most of us], a personally satisfying relationship with God does not always, necessarily, follow from being born into a nominally Christian culture. I have no qualms about sharing what I understand to be God’s revelation and truth as I have received it in the Mennonite tradition and experienced it in my personal life, with anybody, of whatever religious background.

*“...no one is called upon to ‘convert’ another, or to make them change their religion.”*

Of course, no one is called upon to ‘convert’ another, or to make them change their religion. That is a Constantinian distortion which is only conceivable from a position of political, military, and financial power. There is not a single case in the whole New Testament of anyone forcing, perhaps not even encouraging, others to adopt a

new religion. What we have there is people excitedly sharing good news about a risen-again Savior, and the Holy Spirit convincing those whom God chose to add to the *ekklesia*, or assembly of followers of Jesus.”  
[Spain]

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*“I continue to find your letter refreshing and even inspiring. I was particularly inspired by your paragraphs [last] month, on the richness of the diversity of Christian liturgy, and on the profound meaningfulness of the Jewish Yom Kippur celebration.”*

“Thanks for another informative and inspirational letter. I am always impressed by the good balance (in my opinion) that you present regarding opinions/positions/events/reactions. It’s not hard to understand, though, why folks with only one interpretation of the issues may feel uncomfortable. I’m grateful that you do not bow to that pressure.”  
[Canada]

*“I knew there were people struggling to maintain a centre-space in the middle of the carnage and the polarization, but I’d never read anything extensive, produced from such a perspective. You have [maintained] even-handedness, fair play, and a deep humanitarianism...”* [Sri Lanka]

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*Correction:* In the lead article of the July, No. 3, issue, several sources provided the background for the content. Only the quote referring to “*crisis by observation*” should be attributed to Dr. Irwin Mansdorf.

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