Fullness of Life and Justice for All

Dominican Perspectives

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Adelaide
2020
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with its scapegoat principle. Together we gave to shape the dialogical platform 'New We' at the DSTS. We were not searching for a new big WE, but small new we-networks, trying to connect all of this without losing sight of the differences. We share the conviction that Dominican theology must always be a societally relevant theology, focusing on communication with the O/other, because of the salus animarum, the fullness of life and justice for all.

Seeking Fullness of Life in an ‘Oasis of Peace’: Bruno Hussar’s Vision of a Shared Jewish-Palestinian Community

Dennis Half, OP

'I have lived for Israel and her fulfilment, for the Church and her fulfilment,
for reconciliation, peace and brotherly love between the children of Abraham,
for the Good News to be given to the world . . .'

In contrast to an individualistic notion of a 'fullness of life', the concept of a 'fullness of life for all' is aimed at community-building and the promotion of peace, equality, and social justice. To achieve a satisfactory standard of living for all, the 'fullness of life for all' approach encourages individuals to engage with each other and to collaborate for the common good. Working towards this goal can be seen as an attempt to put Jesus' promise of an abundant life into practice. In the well-known story of the Good Shepherd, Jesus identifies as the shepherd who leads his sheep to the pasture of life: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10). While the mission of the 'Son of Man' has, without doubt, an eschatological dimension, it is also one of service and solidarity with the needy and the suffering. As the 'good life for


1. This essay was written with the support of the Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
3. For Christian theological responses to socio-economic challenges based on a 'good life for all' approach, see, for example, I. Shannon Jung, Building the Good Life for All: Transforming Income Inequality in Our Communities (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), as well as the publications by Miroslav Volf and the 'Theology of Joy and the Good Life' project at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, most recently M. Volf and Matthew Crouse, For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).
all' approach speaks to all people, religious and secular alike, it is particularly suitable for connecting with contemporary society. In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic context such as the Middle East, promoting a 'good life for all' in mutual respect and equality is essential for peace.

The shared Jewish-Palestinian ‘Oasis of Peace’ village, officially called Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom, aims at providing a better life for both Jews and Palestinians in the Holy Land, whether they identify as Jewish, Muslim, Christian or non-religious. Named after Isaiah 32:18 ('My people shall dwell in an oasis of peace'), the village was founded in 1970 as the country's first cooperative community of Jewish Israelis and Palestinians possessing Israeli citizenship (Arab Israelis) who live together on the ‘oasis of the idea of bi-cultural, bi-national, and tri-religious coexistence. Located on a hilltop near the Trappist Monastery of Latrun, equidistant from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem on the Israeli side of the 1949 Armistice line (Green Line), the ‘Oasis of Peace’ community is currently home to sixty-five Jewish and Palestinian Arab families, that is about 240 residents. Some families living here are already of the second generation. An extension of the village is planned, probably doubling the number of residents in the near future. In a seemingly never-ending conflict between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, the mixed ‘Oasis of Peace’ community is, for almost fifty years now, a hopeful sign of the times.  

4. Wahat al-Salam (Arabic) and Neve Shalom (Hebrew) both mean ‘Oasis of Peace’. Instead of the official bilingual name of the village, we use here the English translation. For recent publications on the history of the village, see Maria Chiara Rioli, ‘A Christian Look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Bruno Hussar and the Foundation of “New Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam”’, Quest, E-Journal of Fondazione CDEC, No 5, July 2013, can be found at <http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/files/2.%20Rioli-DEF_DEEPDF.pdf> (accessed on 1 November 2018); Brunetto Salvarani (editor), Il folle sogno di Neve Shalom Wahat al-Salam. Israele e palestinesi insieme sulla stessa terra, (Milan: Terra Santa, 2017); Freundinnen und Freunde von Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (editor), Oase des Friedens, Neve Shalom, Wahat al-Salam. Gemeinsam zum Frieden (Zeitschrift israel & palastina), (Berlin: AphorismA, 2018).

5. See Freundinnen und Freunde von Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (editor), Oase des Friedens, 4–5.

6. This is true regardless of the internal conflicts and controversies that shake the community every now and then. As Amia Lieblich has rightly observed, ‘[i]f we have a community in a split and democratic world, creates arguments, disagreements, and scuffles at every step of the way’. Her book, Against All Odds: The Story of a Binational Village, translated from Hebrew by Mor Shavit, and edited by Gayla Goodman (Tel Aviv: Contento Now, 2015), 21. The book is based on interviews with forty residents of the village.

In what follows, we examine the beginnings of what became the ‘Oasis of Peace’ village as an exemplary grassroots project, reflecting a ‘good life for all’ approach. Since the endeavor was initiated by the Dominican friar and peace activist Bruno Hussar (1911–1996), we are particularly interested in two—partly controversial—aspects of the village, namely the religious motivation of the founder and the subsequent non-religious orientation of the community, as well as Hussar’s underlying Dominican spirituality and its impact on the project. Before tackling these issues, we will briefly sketch the life of the founder.

Hussar: A Visionary of Peace in the Holy Land

Born in Cairo in 1911 of non-practicing Jewish parents who hailed from Hungary and France, André Hussar—who later became Brother Bruno—was educated at English and Italian schools in Egypt. In 1929, he went to Paris to study engineering. In France, Hussar discovered Christianity and was baptised into the Catholic Church six years later. ‘From that moment’, as he puts it in his autobiography, ‘I entered a world where all was holy, unaware then what extent my Jewish self was finding expression. I lived only for God, with God and in God.’ Hussar’s spiritual journey eventually led him to the consecrated life. Shortly after World War II, he joined the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) and was given the name Brother Bruno. Through his studies of philosophy, theology, and, in particular, the Bible in the


8. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 15.
Dominican house of studies, Le Saulchoir, he connected more and more to his Jewish roots, which also became an important part of his Catholic identity. As a result of his deep affection for the Jewish people, Hussar devoted his life to interreligious dialogue, focusing especially on reconciliation between Christians and Jews.

In 1953, three years after his ordination as a priest, Hussar was sent on a mission to the newly established State of Israel in order to prepare the foundation of a Dominican center in the Israeli (western) part of Jerusalem, which would be dedicated to the study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. There already existed a Dominican presence in the, at times, Jordanian (eastern) part of Jerusalem, the French École Biblique et Archéologique, which, however, did not include Jewish studies. Nevertheless, the friars in East Jerusalem feared competition and prohibited their confreres in West Jerusalem, inter alia, to use the term ‘Dominican’ in their official name. In 1959/60, after years of preparing the ground, the new center, called House of Isaiah, ultimately opened its doors and quickly became a leading institution for Christian-Jewish understanding. During the Second Vatican Council, when the Church reconsidered her relationship to Judaism and ended its age-long anti-Semitism, Hussar was among those who contributed to this paradigm shift, which found expression in Section 4 of the declaration Nostra aetate (1965).

With the Six-Day War of June 1967, Hussar began to realise the dire need for collaboration among all people living in the Holy Land.


10. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 73.


12. For details, see Monge, ‘Père Bruno Hussar’.

The war had made the fragmentation of Israeli society and the conflicts between its different religions, national, and cultural communities more evident than ever. In reaction to this situation, Hussar and his friends, among them Rina Gefman (1914–2001), decided ‘that something must be done to change it, that there is a need to work, in collaboration with others who have the same aspiration, for peace and reconciliation in Israel.’ The Dominican was increasingly convinced that intellectual exchanges, although indispensable, were not enough to promote change and that certain actions had to be taken. As Anne Le Meignen, a close companion of Hussar since the early days of the village, points out, ‘Bruno’s greatness was his vision of a community […] a village where we would live together as a community, with awareness of our identity and that of the others, respecting one another.’ Hussar’s diverse background as ‘a Christian and a priest,’ ‘a Jew,’ ‘an Israeli,’ and someone who ‘at least feel[s] very close to the Arabs,’ as he once described his ‘fourfold’ identity, made him an advocate of peace between religions and nations. The Dominican remained a member of the ‘Oasis of Peace’ community until his death in 1996.

The ‘Oasis of Peace’ Village: A Religious Endeavor?

Under the impact of Vatican II, Hussar originally thought of founding a Christian-Jewish community centered on the process of reconciliation between the two religions, ‘Jews and Christians,’ he writes, ‘are so divided by history and prejudice, shouldn’t we try to find a way for them to share life together, a community where they may be faithful to their own faith and traditions while fully respecting each other’s?’ He soon realised that there was no peace without the inclusion of the Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian. Hussar henceforth envisioned an ‘Oasis of Peace’ village based on the three ‘Abrahamic’ religions, of which the overall aim was ‘to break down walls of indifference or prejudice or misunderstanding, and so on, between those

13. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 103 (emphasis in the text). See also Gefman, Guetteurs d’aujourd’hui, especially 176.

14. Quoted in Lieblich, Against All Odds, 33.

15. For all quotations, see Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 10.

16. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 102.
communities, and [to] build bridges of respect and understanding.\textsuperscript{17} However, the religious orientation of the project was ultimately disputed by the fact that the Jews and Palestinians who joined the ‘Oasis of Peace’ community from the mid-1970s onwards were mostly secular and more interested in the political aspects of the Jewish-Arab conflict.\textsuperscript{18} This was also a learning process for Hussar, as Le Meignen stresses: ‘In the end, he [Bruno] met a very different reality than the one he expected when he envisioned a village of the three faiths. He suddenly discovered the wealth and profundity to accepting and living with a person as he or she is, even if not faithful.’\textsuperscript{19}

Hussar and his companions quickly understood that the roots of the conflict were not religious. Instead, the clash between two national identities, Jewish and Palestinian-Arab, and their respective claims turned out to be the most pressing obstacle to peace. As a result, the orientation of the ‘Oasis of Peace’ village shifted to a predominantly political project. However, not every member of the community accepted this fundamental change. Gelfman and some others left disappointed.\textsuperscript{20} In the following years, the village went through various transformations, of which several autobiographical publications by current and former residents give witness.\textsuperscript{21} Looking back to the beginnings of the community, Hussar analyzes that

‘[t]he first idea of Neve Shalom was religious in character. This was natural since it originated in the setting of the House of Isaiah [...] In fact, Neve Shalom has become a non-religious undertaking, dedicated to bringing together

the Jews and Arabs in Israel. This is because of the overriding predominance of the Judaeo-Arabic conflict [...] Among its members there are, as it happens, believers, but their faith doesn’t play a decisive role in the life of the community or in educational activities.\textsuperscript{22}

From its earliest days, the ‘Oasis of Peace’ community had the vision not only to promote peace through sharing life, but also through education. As Hussar states:

[W]e wanted to found a school for peace, for peace too is an art. It doesn’t appear spontaneously, it has to be learnt. People would come here from all over the country to meet those from whom they were estranged, wanting to break down the barriers of fear, mistrust, ignorance, misunderstanding, preconceived ideas—all things that separate us—and to build bridges of trust, respect, mutual understanding, and, if possible, friendship.\textsuperscript{23}

‘[I]t [the village] was to be the framework for a school for peace, a place where people come from all over the country with a motivation of just learning to listen to the other one.\textsuperscript{24} The foundation of the ‘School for Peace’ was a crucial step in promoting a ‘good life for all’ in the Holy Land beyond the village community. Over time, the school developed its own pedagogy to contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation between the two peoples.\textsuperscript{25} More than 65,000 Israelis and Palestinians from both Israel and the West Bank have so far been trained in the community’s values of peaceful coexistence, based on the awareness and recognition of the other’s national and cultural identity. In recent years, the ‘School for Peace’ has focused on

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See, for example, Lieblach, Against All Odds, 34, 40, 49-50.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Quoted in Lieblach, Against All Odds, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{20} See Gelfman, Gueuticres d’Aurore, 189.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hussar, When the cloud Lifted, 108–109. See also Hussar, ‘Father of the Dream’, 124.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 103.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Hussar, ‘Father of the Dream’, 124.
\end{itemize}
on courses for change agents, namely, professionals who bear an impact on the conflict, in order for them to employ their occupations to initiate and lead a change, as Nava Sonenschein, a founding member of the School and its current director, explains.  

Despite the overall non-religious character of the 'Oasis of Peace' village, Hussar continued to dream of 'a House of Prayer on the hill [...] [which] will be a place of silence, where anyone may come to meditate, where each creed may worship God, faithful to its own traditions, respectful of those of others.' This 'House of Silence', founded by the community in the 1980s and renamed 'The Bruno Hussar Spiritual-Pluralistic Center' after Hussar's death, provides everyone with a place of prayer and meditation, regardless of his or her personal convictions. The Dominican was convinced that '...we need to hear that thin silence [as discussed in 1 Kings 19:12; D.H.] in the midst of the din of conflict and pain in our world. That thin voice in the silence guides us. That voice has guided me to this village.' Le Meignen who has been engaged in the development of the Center for years, relates that 'Bruno used to say, "Silence is a common language to all". Each person may enter with his or her own personal beliefs.' Hussar's holistic approach and his emphasis on inclusivity and inter-religious acceptance even found support among the secular residents of the village. Today, '[w]hen I talk to people', Le Meignen stresses, 'I explain that the Pluralistic Spiritual Center recognizes everyone, and that in every person, and to every action, there is a spiritual dimension [...] This concept can unite a lot of people.' This spirituality of silence and contemplation, as understood by Hussar and Le Meignen, aims at crossing religious boundaries and bridging differences between people. The future of the Center is currently under discussion among the members of the community.

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27. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 110.
29. Quoted in Lieblich, Against All Odds, 41.
30. Quoted in Lieblich, Against All Odds, 42-43.
31. Under such a circumstance, the impact of the Center on the 'good life for all' approach cannot be evaluated.
32. See Thomas Aquinas, S.th. II-II 188, 6c.
33. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 26.
34. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 80.
Hussar did not return to the ecclesiastical milieu in Jerusalem, but pursued his 'utopian' vision, as critics called it, of building a peace village. Le Meignen notes that 'he [Bruno] was a man of great perseverance, who stuck to his dream despite all the difficulties and challenges, even when many opposed and criticized his actions.'

I believe that Hussar's attitude toward his companions and the 'Oasis of Peace' community tells us indirectly about his motivation as a Dominican to engage in dialogue and peace-building. He understood his personal mission as not being limited to the inner life of the Church, but as transcending its boundaries by breaking new ground towards other religions and ideologies, in a respectful and inclusive way. This also meant leaving the 'safe haven' of the Church, not imposing his religious views on others, and embracing uncertainty and change. Hussar was once asked by German Protestant visitors to the 'Oasis of Peace' village how he, as a Catholic priest, could "live among Jews, Muslims and atheists, without trying to convince them of the truth of the Christian faith?" Hussar answered with a reference to the Beatitudes (Matt 25:31–40) that all those working for peace and reconciliation—religious and secular alike—are 'doing God's work.' The Dominican strongly believed in a communion of people who may not share the same religion, but who are nevertheless committed to charity by welcoming and including everyone as he or she is. As Bob Mark, a companion of Hussar, puts it, '[t]he struggle for peace is in itself the spiritual value shared by people of all religions and by people without religion. His [Bruno's] dream was to create a village in which we could learn how to put these values into practice.' Hussar's openness and respect toward the diversity of God's people, paired with optimism and trust in jointly building a future of a 'good life for all', is characteristic of Dominican spirituality. This spiritual attitude fit well with the idea of founding a peace village beyond all national and religious boundaries.

Conclusion

The shared Jewish-Palestinian 'Oasis of Peace' community can be seen as an attempt to contribute to a 'good life for all' in the Holy Land in the context of the Jewish-Arab conflict. In a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and, at the same time, secular society, the concept of a 'good life for all' can offer a suitable approach to promote the values of peace and equality. Although Hussar initially had a different vision, he adapted—thanks to his spiritual background—to the needs of those he encountered in this endeavor. After Hussar's death, the 'Oasis of Peace' community lauded him as their visionary and pioneer who had dreamed of a cooperative village that overcomes cultural, religious, and national divide. In his last will, the Dominican recalls the purpose of the village community as follows:

Here in Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, we have one aim: peaceful reconciliation between our two peoples. In order to work fruitfully towards this aim, we need to have mutual understanding and consideration of each other. This means love. I really want that what we do together will be done as an act of love, reconciliation and peace between all the members of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam [...]. Faith in the ultimate victory of love over hate—this is the real and deepest aim of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam."

35. Hussar, 'Father of the Dream', 125.
36. See Gelfman, Gueutres d'aurore, 177; Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 104; as well as the allocation by Hussar's confere Bernad Dupuy during the requiem service in Paris, on 7 March 1996, in Shalom, Bruno, edited by Bruno Segre (Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam, 1997), 63–68, here at 64.
37. Quoted in Lieblisch, Against All Odds, 35.
38. This corresponds to the priorities defined by the Dominican General Chapter of Ávila in 1986, to which the Dominican Order is particularly committed. See Acta Capituli Generalis Diffinitorum Ordinis Praedicatorum Abulensis 1986, chapter 2, No 22.
40. Hussar, When the Cloud Lifted, 110.
42. See Ulrich Engel, Gott der Menschen. Wegmarken dominikanischer Theologie (Ostfildern: Grünwald, 2010).