

RELIGION & DEMOCRACY

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Sliding Toward the Palestinian Cause

By Lawrence Adams

The Spring of 1990 saw a new emphasis by churches across the theological and political spectrum on the Middle East. Nearly complete is a major shift in the ecumenical and Catholic churches -- from what one rabbi called the post-Holocaust "ecumenical deal" with the Jewish community, which led to unqualified support for Israel, to favorable views of Arab states and Palestinian independence.

On May 13-15 an ecumenical coalition called Churches for Middle East Peace sponsored its third in a series of "Washington Advocacy Days" held in the last year. During these days advocates are taught lobbying techniques and set loose upon Congress to work in favor of the creation of a Palestinian state (with the proviso that Israeli security needs be recognized), in opposition to Israeli settlements in occupied territories, and for restrictions on aid to Israel. The World Council of Churches also announced in March that this year's "Palm Sunday to Pentecost" prayer and policy focus would be for "peace in the Holy Land"; its Palm Sunday prayer issued for use in churches drew protests from some Jewish leaders for praying to free Israelis "from the illusion that depriving others of their rights, or even eliminating them, will provide security or reaffirm self-identity." A March

WCC convocation in Seoul fully endorsed Palestinian statehood.

Policy transformations

These events occur in the midst of major political changes in Israel and in U.S.-Israeli relations, in which alignments are shifting and interests are being redefined. Israel's coalition government led by the Likud party collapsed in April because of U.S. govern-

ment pressure and shifting views in the Labor party over negotiations with the Palestinians.

At the same time, tensions between Israel and Arab states, Palestinians, and Christian groups are increasing over Israeli settlement policies. Many fear that emigrating Soviet Jews will settle in the territories occupied by Israel during the 1967 war where most Palestinians live. In late April a right-wing group of Jews, with some Israeli government support, took over a Greek Orthodox-run hospice in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem.

Some Arab states have renewed their hostility to Israel. Iraq has threatened war. And even Egypt -- which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1978 -- has renewed relations with bitter foes of Israel, such as Syria and Saudi Arabia. Israel seems increasingly isolated, and its conservatives increasingly belligerent. These troubles are directly related to the problem of

Rocks & Bullets

The inequality between the weapons displayed by these Palestinian youths has come to dwarf concerns about the Islamic world being stacked up against Israel.

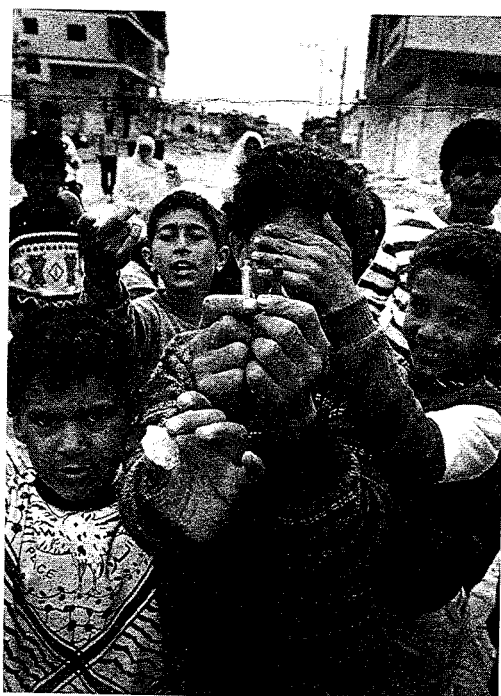


Photo by William Clough

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Israel's 1.5 million Palestinian inhabitants -- Muslim and some Christian Arabs whose restlessness boiled over two years ago in the *intifada* (uprising). The Israeli crackdown has brought world attention and drawn wide sympathy for the Palestinian cause. U.S. policy began to change in late 1988, when the Palestine Liberation Organization for the first time declared itself an independent state, and ostensibly renounced terrorist activity and recognized Israel's existence. This move seemed to signal a major shift from the PLO's goal of eliminating the Jewish state to acceptance of a "two-state" solution. U.S. Secretary of State James Baker has been pressing Israel's Likud Party leaders toward negotiations with Palestinians, straining the traditionally close U.S.-Israeli ties and exacerbating Israeli government instability.

At the same time, U.S. interests in developing relations in the Arab and Muslim worlds -- for instance, over oil resources and strategic stability -- have coincided with decreasing Soviet ability to sustain former allies and clients in the Middle East. These nations are looking more to the West for aid and influence. These warming relations between the U.S. and Syria, the PLO, and even Iran, through cooperation over releasing American hostages in Lebanon, appear ominous to Israel.

Israel can legitimately point to continued hostility on the part of these newly "moderate" elements. Israeli leaders are most

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VATICAN CITY -- Pope John Paul II looks at a gift that PLO leader Yasser Arafat presented during their meeting last April. The pontiff urged Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate a settlement allowing both to live in peace.

INS PHOTO / AP / Wide World



JERUSALEM -- The Latin, Greek and Armenian Patriarchs of Jerusalem leave the Church of the Holy Sepulchre after closing of its doors in protest of Jewish settlers occupying a house nearby.

INS PHOTO / AP / Wide World



disturbed by the PLO, which would clearly control any independent Palestinian state. It has a history of violence, even against non-compliant Palestinians. Though the PLO supposedly is now willing to coexist with Israel, PLO leader Yasser Arafat recently praised Iraqi president Hussein's threats to attack Israel, telling Hussein that "we will enter Jerusalem victorious and will raise our flag on its walls. You will enter with me, riding your white stallion."

Church shifts

In the two years during which the PLO and the Palestinian cause have enjoyed greater legitimacy in U.S. policy, American church bodies also made explicit shifts, primarily in response to the *intifada*. While support for the PLO has been expressed by religious radicals since that organization's founding in 1964, support for a separate Palestinian state has more recently emerged as a major *cause celebre* in official church policy. The current emphasis reveals an undoubtedly genuine concern for the rights of Palestinians, particularly the Christians, that has hardened over the years into problematic policy.

The United Methodists, for example, in their May 1988, General Conference, passed a resolution by 816-76 calling for an end to all United States military and security aid to Israel "until Israel ceases the repression of Palestinians in the occupied territory." Their



call was based on a sweeping condemnation: "Israel's current iron-fist policy is totally unacceptable as civilized behavior."

☾ A U.S. Catholic bishops' policy statement in November 1989, called for "Palestinian territorial and political sovereignty" (a euphemism for statehood), yet in a limited form which accounts for the need to protect the security of Israel. Implementation of this solution would require negotiation with Palestinians who have limited objectives, such as being willing to co-exist with Israel. While Pope John Paul II has not himself endorsed a Palestinian state, he has met three times with Arafat, most recently in early April.

Evangelicals and fundamentalists have traditionally given special attention to the Middle East. This is particularly true of those who interpret Biblical prophecy to require an unequivocal and uncritical support of Israel or who look to Middle Eastern events for special signs of the Apocalypse. Indeed, "Christian Zionism" retains strong appeal.

☾ However, in 1989 both the mainstream evangelical *Christianity Today* and the radical evangelical journal *Sojourners* reported on the crisis sympathetically to the Palestinians. *Sojourners* was unabashedly supportive of Palestinian statehood, and condemned Israel for its actions by invoking an analogy now common among Israel's critics: "Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is, in its most basic form, the Middle Eastern incarnation of apartheid." Such analogies, with implications of racism and organized repression, are not uncommon in recent church analysis.

The shifts in the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are clearly in a pro-Palestinian direction, but with recognition of the old interests. A July 1988, Episcopal General Convention resolution, for example: (1) affirmed Israel's right to exist and to security; (2) affirmed the rights of Palestinians to self-determination, including their own state and representatives; (3) called for an international committee under U.N.



Anglican Bishop Samir Kafity, who presides over Jerusalem, has been an explicit promoter of Palestinian statehood. The Episcopal Church in the United States has gravitated toward a similar position during recent years.

Photo by William Clough

auspices; and (4) committed the Church to prayer. This policy was proclaimed in the context of "the importance of the Church in the exercise of its prophetic role by standing on the side of the oppressed in their struggle for justice, and by promoting justice, peace and reconciliation for all peoples in the region."

Over the last two years, these oldline churches have been asked by their leaders and Washington offices to do such things as develop educational materials on the Palestinian issue, to consider divestment from companies which do business with Israel, and to write government officials regarding

reducing or halting aid to Israel, as well as supporting a separate Palestinian state.

However, recent church analysis and education calls little attention to any Palestinian responsibility for current tensions. The *intifada* is now treated by many in the churches as a legitimate cry against demonstrated injustice, with little suggestion it could be used as a means to destabilize or inflict harm on Israeli society. The PLO's history of terrorism and violence is rarely mentioned. Often quoted is the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Samir Kafity, who declared at the May 1989, World Council of Churches' Conference on Mission and Evangelism that the *intifada* has "biblical roots" and is aimed at achieving peace.

What aims to achieve peace?

What can Christians offer to the conflicts and politics of the Middle East? Is Palestinian statehood a necessary requirement for justice? Should church advocacy be so specific, and place such hopes in particular political prescriptions? Such questions must be raised, particularly when the political course in question may lead to even greater violence or injustice.

Churches should distinguish between their own contributions and their expectations of politics. We hold states to certain norms; diplomatic and political actions should lead to order and stability, and encourage just

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Can the Islamic World Embrace Religious Pluralism?

By Dr. Habib C. Malik

Among the 200 million Muslims of the Arab World there live about 12 to 15 million native Christians. With the exception of the 1.5 million embattled Christians of Lebanon, who constitute the last remaining free Christian community in the entire Middle East, nearly all the rest have been reduced by the Muslim majority to second-class, or *dhimmi*, status.

What is it like to live as a Christian -- or a Jew for that matter -- in a predominantly Muslim environment like the Middle East? Regarded by Muslims as "People of the Book," Christians and Jews were traditionally tolerated but never treated as equals. It used to be that such non-Muslim minorities living in an Islamic society were subjected to certain specified restrictions. For example, they could not give evidence against Muslims in a court of law; they had to pay a special tax; they were prohibited from possessing or carrying arms and could not serve in the military establishment; they were not allowed to preach their religious faith or proselytize others; and they could not marry Muslim women. They could, however, practice their own religion, maintain their places of worship, and engage in commerce and other gainful livelihood. In Ottoman times these non-Muslim minorities were organized into pockets of autonomy known as *millets*.

Nowadays, many countries in the Near and Middle East -- with the notable exception of Saudi Arabia -- display the outward features of modern nation states and therefore do not rigidly implement the letter of Islamic law (the *Shari'a*). While this has somewhat eased the old restrictions on the non-Muslim minorities, they continue to experience severe limitations in the domain of personal, political and religious freedoms, including the freedom of expression. In effect, they remain second-class citizens in their own ancestral lands. What is worse, they have to contend with periodic and unpredictable outbursts of Khomeini-style religious fanaticism and the revival of the idea of Islamic *jihad*, or holy war. Witness the



EL SEREIN, EGYPT -- Coptic monks in Egypt celebrate the liturgy at dawn. This land of Pharaohs and pyramids was also the cradle of Christian monasticism. RNS Photo.

ongoing turmoil in Lebanon and southern Sudan. Christian religious orders are often persecuted; the expulsion of the Jesuits from Iraq in the late 1960s and early 70s is a case in point. Both our established and evangelical churches in the West have told us next to nothing about this problem.

Few may realize it but there are innumerable minority groups throughout the Middle East, nearly all of them with roots predating the rise of Islam in the Seventh Century A.D. There are the Coptic Christians of Egypt; the many Jewish communities still remaining in the Arab world; the Jews of Israel; the Christians of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and southern Sudan -- including Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Nestorians (Assyrians), Greek Catholics (Melkites), Chaldeans, Maronites, Latins, and Protestants; the Druze of Syria, Lebanon and Israel; the Armenians of Lebanon; and others. Even the Muslim majority is itself divided into the two main groups of Sunnis and Shiites, along with a host of esoteric offshoot sects of these two branches.

Why is there widespread ignorance of these native Middle Eastern religious minorities? The Middle East has been approached traditionally, whether by Western governments or even Western churches, in a few set and largely unimaginative ways. Since the end of the Second World War, most interest and involvement

in the Middle East have occurred within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Prior to that the Middle East was often the object of romantic fascination for Westerners -- what can be designated as the "Lawrence of Arabia" syndrome.

For over forty years the Arab-Israeli conflict has tended to overshadow and color whatever attempts have been undertaken by the Western churches to conduct ecumenical dialogue between Christians and non-Christians (Jews and Muslims). As a result the ecumenical outreach has been politicized, or it has concentrated on such least-common-denominator features as Israel being the Holy Land for the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions. The really thorny theological and philosophical issues often have been watered down or avoided altogether.

Another outlook views the Middle East as a vital reserve for much-coveted natural resources and as a geopolitical arena for strategic competition among the big powers. But, when one stops here, one gives credence to indigenous accusations of colonial exploitation and imperialism leveled repeatedly against the West. Surely the Western mind and spirit should have more to say to the Middle East than just the language of oil and weaponry.

Seen from the perspective of non-Muslim minorities seeking to coexist in dignity and freedom side by side with an Islamic majority, the Middle East problem reveals a whole new complexity. The heart of the political and social problems now hinges on the anomalous relationship between Islamic theology and worldview and democracy.

Democracy as it is understood in the West means essentially three things: Majority rule, minority rights, and the peaceful resolution of all disputes through constitutionally established electoral and legal mechanisms. Some in the West, who in their desire to pre-package and export democracy to the Third World, lose sight of the extent of the readiness by the indigenous cultures to comprehend -- much less to accept -- these fundamental democratic assumptions taken for granted in say the England of John Locke or the America of Thomas Jefferson. That is why the democratic ideal has rarely encountered fertile terrain in a place like the Arab World. Suffice it to say here by way of explanation that in Islam, unlike in Christianity, there is no acceptance of church-state separation; and the Middle East, unlike the West for better or for worse, has not undergone 200 years of secularization. Therefore whenever some voices in the West

have emphasized a narrow, incomplete notion of democracy, as solely a question of one man-one vote, minorities in the Islamic world have suffered.

With the gradual waning of Communism as a world force, many in the West have begun to eye militant Islam as the next great challenge to freedom and justice on the horizon. Unlike Communism, however, Islam is a time-tested total outlook on life. Any

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illusions about Eastern Europe's mass popular uprisings in the name of freedom and democracy moving south of Bulgaria into the Middle East any time soon must be shed. This sobering fact renders all the more pressing serious attention, particularly by our churches, to the problem of non-Muslim minorities in the Near and Middle East.

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**Taking
Action:**

Write your denomination's mission or social action agency for information on church advocacy for human rights, and especially religious freedom, for non-Muslim minorities in the Middle and Near East. A helpful introduction to specific human rights problems in the Middle East is the Department of State's 1989 Human Rights Report (\$34.00). To order, send a check to: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402-9325.

Church Leaders React to IRD Concern for Nicaragua

As soon as the Nicaraguan election results came in, there was the inevitable chorus of "explanations." Pro-Sandinista missionaries gave tortured analyses of how the Nicaraguan people could have betrayed their putative saviors. But our churches still face many unanswered questions about their own role in Nicaraguan politics.

The IRD Chairman, Dr. Edmund Robb, Jr., attempted to stir up a discussion with a March 5 letter to leaders of oldline U.S. denominations asking them to re-evaluate their churches' mission in Nicaragua. (See *Religion & Democracy*, April 1990.) Most of the replies were polite, *pro forma* acknowledgments of Dr. Robb's letter. A few church leaders tried to look on the bright side. They welcomed the improved prospect of peace in Nicaragua, while leaving untouched the thorny problem of pro-Sandinista bias in their own mission agencies.

Bishop Herbert Chilstrom of the **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America** (ELCA) declared, "The ELCA has for a number of years advocated political solutions to the problems in Central America." Bishop Chilstrom pointed to the free elections and peaceful transfer of power in Nicaragua as a fulfillment of the church's hopes. The Lutheran bishop did not mention any second thoughts about specific mission programs.

Only one official responded

directly to Robb's criticisms of the churches. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Director of Global Mission for the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**, strongly defended his church's missionaries. He described them as deeply-committed servants who "feel the pain and problems of the people far more deeply than anyone from the outside." He characterized the IRD as outsiders who "expressed no compassion nor sorrow over the years of suffering and struggle and the deaths among the Nicaraguan people."

Dr. Kirkpatrick asserted, "Those

Sandinismo."

CEPAD itself also wrote to Dr. Robb, seeking a correction of one point in his letter. He had stated, as an example of CEPAD's compromise with the Sandinista Front, that "ten CEPAD leaders ran on the Sandinista ticket for the National Assembly." The Rev. Paul Jeffrey, a **United Methodist** missionary who edits CEPAD's newsletter, objected: "That information ... was not at any time true."

Mr. Jeffrey stated that, in fact, only two persons associated with CEPAD had run for the National



Any Hope Left in Christian Marxism?

This mural in the Church of Santa Maria de los Angeles, the center of the "popular church" in Nicaragua, shows Sandinista Front founder Carlos Fonseca (left) with an FSLN flag behind, and hero Augusto Sandino with the Nicaraguan flag (right).

of us committed to Christ's mission have never been captive to right or left." He did not explain how this principle was reflected in the stationing of Presbyterian missionaries with pro-Sandinista organizations such as the Antonio Valdivieso Center, the Council of Evangelical Churches (CEPAD), and Witness for Peace. The director of the Valdivieso Center, for which PCUSA missionary Gary Campbell works, defined the center's purpose as "accompanying theologically ... the Marxist revolutionary process of

Assembly. One was Sixto Ulloa, a former CEPAD official, who sought re-election on the Sandinista ticket. The other, Rodolfo Mejia, a lawyer who has represented CEPAD, appeared on the opposition slate. Mejia won a seat in the assembly; Ulloa lost.

A post-election issue of the CEPAD newsletter added further information: "In February's elections, more than two dozen pastors and other evangelical leaders ran as candidates for municipal council positions. All were apparently

candidates for the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN)."

The newsletter contained brief comments by six council candidates, including three CEPAD regional directors. Francisco Juarez, a CEPAD regional director and candidate in Leon, said: "In CEPAD we carry out projects which support life, we identify with the people. As candidate for the Frente, I can put this more into practice. I can carry out the prophetic ministry of the church." Carlos Narvaez, head of a CEPAD pastors' committee and FSLN candidate in Rivas, maintained: "All Christians out of principle have to identify with the party that looks out for the interests of the poor. The only party in Nicaragua that does that is the Frente [Sandinista]. The UNO [opposition] is where all the powerful sectors are, looking out for their own interests. If an evangelical is involved with the UNO, they are lost."

Comments like these manifest a disturbing tendency among CEPAD leaders to link commitment to Christ with commitment to the Sandinista Front. By contrast, there were many pastors in CEPAD's member denominations who apparently abstained from such direct partisan involvement.

Mr. Jeffrey called Dr. Robb's statement about CEPAD leaders running for the National Assembly a "fabrication." In fact, Robb had based his statement on remarks by CEPAD's president, Dr. Gustavo Parajon. In an August 1989 interview which was not published until January 1990, Dr. Parajon hailed the growing political role of CEPAD-affiliated pastors: "In fact, the Sandinista Party has asked at least ten evangelicals, none of whom are party members, to be

candidates. With ninety-six seats in the assembly, that's a significant percentage.... As a matter of fact, all those who have been asked are pastors, active in CEPAD."

But evidently there were not ten CEPAD leaders on the ballot for National Assembly. IRD Executive Director Kent Hill sent letters to CEPAD expressing regret for the error in the March 5 letter. He also asked for an explanation of Dr. Parajon's words. Were there indeed at one time ten CEPAD pastors slated to run for the assembly? Did they then withdraw from the race, or did the Sandinista Front retract its invitation to them? The IRD has yet to receive a clarification from Dr. Parajon.

As it faces the future in a new Nicaragua, CEPAD will have more questions to answer. Will it continue to lend its support to the Sandinistas, as they try to "govern from below"? Or will it pull back from politics into more traditional ministries?

So far the signs are mixed. A March 14 pastoral letter from CEPAD congratulated Violeta Chamorro upon her election as president. The council pledged to pray for Mrs. Chamorro and "to assist her when her efforts are of benefit to the people of Nicaragua."

On the other hand, the post-election CEPAD newsletter derided Mrs. Chamorro as "boring," "an aristocratic caricature of the suffering Nicaraguan mother," "window dressing to the UNO government." It suggested that, in voting Daniel Ortega out of office, the Nicaraguan people were like the Israelites who rebelled against Moses in the wilderness.

Which direction will our U.S. churches encourage the Nicaraguan church council to

follow? Will they still send missionaries and money to back the Sandinista line? Or will they support a non-partisan, reconciling CEPAD?

-- Alan Wisdom

IRD's Resolution Bank Available

A major purpose of The Institute on Religion and Democracy is supporting and educating participants in the church policy process. Another purpose is to contribute substantially to responsible policy making.

IRD has developed model resolutions that seek to demonstrate a careful approach to policy issues, provoke discussion, and influence the direction of church pronouncements. Our goal is to enable our members to challenge their churches to approach international realities in ways consistent with their faith commitments, and with means that support democratic governance, order and liberty.

Some resolutions come with background articles and talking points to support debate, and are designed for adaptation to particular situations, e.g. conventions, committees, etc. The current set includes South Africa, Nicaragua, Nepal, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, international debt, and a number that speak to procedural matters -- such as full disclosure of grants, open meetings and records, and the activities of church Washington offices.

For a set of resolutions, or further information, please contact Lawrence Adams in care of IRD, 729 15th St., NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC, 20005. Phone: (202) 393-3200.

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practices. But the foundational shifts in attitude, ideology and relationships necessary to peace require actions of a different nature. Churches can:

Engage in hopeful prayer. Believers can pray for and encourage reconciling civil trends to develop even if they seem unlikely. The major changes which

occurred within the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in the last five years seemed similarly unlikely not long ago.

Defend standards of justice and uphold security commitments in Israel and the region.

Even Israel's strongest supporters should oppose human rights violations and hold Israel accountable for its historical commitment to Western democracy. But Israel's international legitimacy is not negated by its own misbehavior, nor by threats from its neighbors.

Political justice for the Palestinians must also account for the probable character of a Palestinian state if the PLO, given its record of terrorism, dominated its violent internal politics, and its

relationship with radical states. One result of the sudden emergence of an autonomous Palestine would likely be to create an immediate enemy for Israel and precipitate major war unless there is clear commitment to democratic rights and coexistence. Independent statehood may be archaic and costly in the complex world of the Middle East. Some seek a larger, multinational confederation as a better option.

Seek avenues of reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis; Jews, Muslims and Christians; Arabs and non-Arabs. The weariness with conflict, the necessity of coexistence if any measure of prosperity is to be achieved, and the growing acceptance of new realities by younger generations can be encouraged by churches, businesses and schools.

Churches should approach the Middle East in ways which truly lead to life and peace for all whom God has placed in this ancient land. Prayer, reconciliation, and a realistic appraisal of the lessons of history can provide a responsible starting point not tied to a specific political agenda.

IRD Mailing Problems: The Computer Did It

We recently discovered a foul-up with our computer mailing list that stemmed from a faulty update of our software when we installed new computer equipment earlier this year. Unfortunately, the problem resulted in address changes not being recorded and many new IRD members not receiving the newsletter.

We are working hard to update and correct our list. If you have not received newsletters to which you are entitled, or if the newsletter still is going to an incorrect address, please let us know so that we can respond promptly. And please accept our apologies.



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