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BOOK REVIEW

Two Histories of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Reviewed by Monsignor Michael Nazir-Ali [1]

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It is very gratifying that men of the stature of Colin Chapman and James Patrick have undertaken this exercise in 'good disagreement'. In matters such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is manifest that all the truth is not on one side or the other and so it becomes important for the reader to discern what is true in each account. This is quite different, of course, from central doctrinal and moral questions where 'good disagreement' in the one fellowship is not possible.

Chapman and Patrick have set out their respective positions on opposite pages. This makes for ease in comparison. It soon becomes obvious that each side has been wronged and the wrongs need to be put right. John Stott used to say that there is no theology of the land in the New Testament. Prophecies of a 'return to the land' in the biblical books cannot simply be applied today when both the Jewish and Arab populations have such diverse origins. What can be said is that the Jews have the right to enter and settle in the land with which they have such rich historic, cultural and religious associations. This cannot be, however, as the Balfour Declaration recognised, to the detriment of the non-Jewish communities also settled in the land. History and theology, conquest and settlement, cannot easily be prised apart.

Christians in the land, whether Palestinian, Armenian or Messianic should be given much more attention than they usually are. Their contribution to the revival of the Arabic language, nationalism and education is out of all proportion to their numbers

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(even if these were much larger in the land than they are now). In the Holy Land they have as much stake as anyone else.

In a similar way, Oriental Jews, both Mizrahi and Sephardi, from Yemen, Iraq, Iran, India, Egypt, Morocco, and Ethiopia, who form the majority of the Israeli population, have sometimes fled centuries of persecution and present-day danger to be in Israel. Many of them have nowhere else to go. They too need much more attention than Jewry of European background, who are often on the airwaves.

The question as to whether lands once conquered by Muslims can ever pass to non-Muslim control is an urgent one to address in Interreligious and intercultural dialogue. The future of peaceful co-existence in India, the Iberian Peninsula, the Balkans etc depends on such dialogue. In this respect the Holy Land is no different from other parts of the world, even if there are special features to the attachment of Muslims to their holy sites. Christians also have such attachments and the Jews have them most of all.

The arguments on each side reveal opportunities that have been missed. There must be a realistic commitment to a two-state solution, with each side being prepared to sacrifice some prized beliefs.

There were, of course, many Catholic reform minded people like Erasmus, John Fisher, Thomas More and Reginald Pole who wanted the Scriptures to be read in their original language and made available in the vernacular, albeit with the consent of the Church. It is well known that bishops and other ecclesiastical authorities often protected Jews from extremist threats. Protestants were not alone in such attitudes. At the same time, neither Catholics nor Protestants can be excused from the taint of anti-semitism.

I wonder whether the two authors would be prepared to go a step further and, instead of just setting out their positions, they would attempt a synthesis so that a single piece of writing brings together the diverse experiences and situation of the peoples in the Holy Land, with, perhaps, a joint attempt at proposing a solution to this mother of problems. That would, indeed, be a signal contribution from our distinguished authors!

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