

FAITH AND THE INTIFADA: Palestinian Christian Voices
EDITORS: Naim S. Ateek, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Marc Ellis.
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reviewed by Rev. Bassam M. Madany

On December 8, 1987, a fatal traffic accident took place in the Gaza Strip. An Israeli truck hit a car carrying Palestinian laborers. Many similar accidents had occurred in the past, but this one was different. It triggered protests and demonstrations against the Israeli army which has been occupying the Gaza Strip and the West Bank since June 1967. Palestinian youths began to throw stones at the Israeli soldiers. The confrontations led to the arrest of many young men and women who were held in detention camps. This uprising, Intifada in Arabic, has continued to the present.

In her preface to the book, Rosemary Radford Ruether states that "the book represents, in part, papers that were given at the First International Symposium on Palestinian Liberation Theology at Tantur, between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, during March 10-17, 1990." The work is divided into five parts dealing with:

- THE PALESTINIAN REALITY
- PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY
- POWER, JUSTICE, AND THE BIBLE
- WOMEN, FAITH AND THE INTIFADA
- INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE QUEST FOR PALESTINIAN THEOLOGY

The book comes out of a context which accepts the modern notion of "regionalized" theologies. This is seen in the Preface where Father Naim Ateek speaks of the necessity for a Palestinian theology of liberation. Right away, one who is convinced of the importance of maintaining a truly ecumenical theology based on the tradition of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, is taken aback by the contents of most of the chapters of the book. Do we have to fashion a specific theology for every problem we confront? Or, should our quest to find proper solutions to present-day problems be found within the vast treasury of the various disciplines of the historic Christian faith?

Having stated the above unease at the "map" provided by Liberationist theologians for a just solution of the Palestinian problem, one can readily sympathize with Christian Palestinians. They are thoroughly distressed at the attitude of many Christians within the West who have been extremely pro-Israel and who have expounded the Word of God in such a way as to legitimize Israel and its conquests. It seems to them that the only friends they have are the Liberation theologians; so they welcome them as well as their theological baggage.

The Palestinian problem has been aggravated by the triumph of Dispensational hermeneutics within many evangelical churches. This radical method of "reading" the Bible led them to accept the notion that the birth of the State of Israel was based on

solid Biblical grounds. More than a generation of Christians was brought up on the belief that the birth of Israel in May 1948 was a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

But having acknowledged these facts, the statement on page 2 that "there are more than sixty million Christian fundamentalists in the United States" who are pro-Israel cannot be sustained. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of a great concern among many evangelicals for the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, the authors of these papers have not taken into account that several churches had never accepted Dispensationalism nor blindly showed a one-sided attitude vis-a-vis Israel. One may mention the, the Reformed Church in America, the Christian Reformed Church and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod.

In sketching a historical account of what happened to the Palestinians since the beginning of the British Mandate after the First World War, Munir Fasheh who contributed a chapter on PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY, seems to be unable to distinguish between official policies and actions of Western governments and the attitude of Christians living within the West. He states on page 64:

The distortion of the world has been accomplished through an elaborate ideological structure and through European hegemony, of which Western Christianity has been an integral part. That Western European governments were expanding their empires is a fact. But one may not charge Western Christians for all the wrong policies of their governments. It is extremely doubtful that the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which declared the British Government's favor for the establishment of a national home for the Jews in Palestine, was the result of a Christian demand for such a home.

The contributors to the various chapters of the book have been living under severe pressure due to the oppressive nature of the Israeli occupation. This explains the anguished style of their essays. Suad Younan, a Palestinian woman who serves as coordinator of women's groups in Lutheran churches throughout the West Bank writes about her assessment of the help received from Liberation Theology:

"Nowadays, there has developed in the world a theology of liberation, which seeks to meet the distress of the people on the basis of the biblical message. As a Palestinian, I regard liberation theology as an essential expression of faith in the message of Christ, to liberate woman and man without discrimination of gender and race. As a Christian, I see Jesus as a unique revelation of true humanism and personhood, for he helps us to understand our personhood. His life displays characteristics of love and compassion. In him, women and men, oppressed and oppressor, are set free to work together on behalf of the liberating purpose of God."

There is no mention of sin, atonement and salvation from the power of the evil one. No doubt Palestinians do need freedom and self-determination. But should the elaboration of a "Palestinian" theology be pursued at the cost of exchanging Apostolic Christianity for liberation theology? The salvation which is set forth in most of the chapters of this book is purely horizontal. Matters of the here and now are important within the Christian tradition, but not at the expense of ignoring the vertical dimension of the faith.

The first response to THE QUEST FOR PALESTINIAN THEOLOGY forms the fifth part of the book. The contributor is Marc Ellis, a Jewish theologian who directs the Justice and Peace Studies Program at the Maryknoll School of Theology. He deplores the ignoring of the Palestinian problem in the regular dialogues which go on between Christians and Jews in North America. His words are very harsh, but one can understand the agony of soul which prompted them:

"This, then, is the ecumenical dialogue --- culpability in ethnocide --- and it includes such august bodies as the National and World Council of Churches, despite their protests to the contrary. With this knowledge the ecumenical dialogue takes on a criminal aspect and those who continue it become liable in criminal activity. If this sounds too strong, perhaps one can suggest a better term for those who help legitimate the displacement of a people and the destruction of its culture? Certainly Jews have had little hesitation in defining this activity when it relates to their own community."

Marc Ellis' chapter is followed by one contributed by Mary H. Shertz whose sympathies for a radical hermeneutic are quite evident. She has a serious problem with the Hebrew Bible. But granted that the Old Testament has been wrongly "read" by Jews and some Christians, does that justify her embracing of Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza's "feminist" reading of the same text? What is really astonishing in this chapter whose author is a New Testament scholar is that hardly any attention was given to the classical NT passage, Romans 9-11 which deals with the problem of Israel, its failure and its future salvation. Saint Paul makes no mention at all of any re-constituting of an Israeli commonwealth. If we take this passage seriously as well as the teachings of the Epistle to the Hebrews, a proper reading of the Bible does not yield a de jure basis for the State of Israel. That this state exists is an undeniable fact, but its presence is a de facto matter, and must not be regarded as supported by a specifically Biblical sanction.

In conclusion, there are two gems within this book, one by Bassam E. Bannoura entitled, BEARING THE CROSS. It is a sermon on Isaiah 53:1-12 and Luke 9:3. It should be printed as a pamphlet and made available to Christians throughout the world. The other one was contributed by the well known Father Elias Chacour entitled, A PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN CHALLENGE TO THE WEST. Their tone is quite different from the majority of the other papers due to their irenic spirit.

In any future edition, two corrections are a must. The first one on page 80. Tariq Ibn Zayyad, who led the Islamic armies early in the 8th century in their conquest of Spain, could not have been the liberator of the Jews from the Inquisition. This infamous institution did not take shape until after 1492! On page 84, the first name of the Lebanese scholar Nasif Al-Yazeji wrongly appears as Nasir Al Yazeji.