REVIEW ARTICLE

ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS:
MUSLIM AND JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

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Marc H. Ellis, Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation (Markynoll: Orbis Books, 1988).


Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, Islam and the Problem of Israel (Islamic Council of Europe, 1990 reprint).


Contemporary debates about the historical and theological relationship between Judaism and Islam have been marred by the tragic continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It should be noted, however, that the history of the Jewish-Islamic encounter cannot be reduced to a mere fifty years of bitter relationship, nor can it be viewed as a simple dialectical happening. History is a complex human process, and it is definitely erroneous to ascribe to it monolithic explanations and views. Muslims and Jews have lived together for many centuries, sharing both good luck and misfortunes. The present anomaly has to be understood in the context of the rise of the West since, at least, the Industrial Revolution, and the subsequent decline of Islamic civilization. The three authors, whose works are under review here, represent divergent, and sometimes contradictory, views on Anti-Semitism, Israel, Judaism, Islam, and the Palestinians.
In *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, Marc Ellis argues that the Jewish people are at crossroads and that a deep sense of crisis pervades the modern Jewish experience. What are the causes of such a crisis? The author contends that at the heart of the Jewish experience throughout history has been liberation through struggle, self-affirmation, and identification with the downtrodden and meek. In spite of their achievements, the Jewish people have suffered tremendously. Fair enough. But the values of justice, love, and emancipation that permeate Jewish life and thought have been tainted by "evil practices" that deviate from true human and Jewish values:

The Jewish community's struggle to be faithful to those values has been shadowed by the reality of betrayal, for in advance of our interests we have been slave merchants and masters, supported corrupt kings and governments, and even at times oppressed one another. Today, in Israel and in the Jewish community in North America, policies and alliances increasingly resemble those historically used to oppress our own people. On the Israeli side, one need mention the recently-concluded occupation of Lebanon and the continuing subjugation of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians; just as horrific are the relations Israel maintains with South Africa and Israel's military assistance to the murderous governments of El Salvador and Guatemala. In North America efforts continue to establish Israel as a U.S. outpost by building up its military. Relations between American Jewry and the oppressed of North America remain strained, and the ambivalent courtship of Israel by fundamentalist Christians continues. [Ibid., p. 2]

Ellis' central preoccupation is universal suffering. Far from claiming that suffering is a quality possessed by the Jewish people alone, he contends that Jews have to learn from their own historical suffering, and carry the heavy responsibility of being "a light upon other nations" in this regard. The Holocaust, no doubt, is a major event in the modern history of Europe and the Jewish people. "For contemporary Jews, the overwhelming experience of suffering is the Jewish Holocaust, the death of six million Jews and the attempted annihilation of our entire people. Interpretation of the event is omnipresent, though insights are diverse and often controversial." [Ibid., p. 7] Ellis makes the logical connection that "fidelity to the Jewish people in the present lies in grappling with this experience of destruction and death". [Ibid. p. 11]

Now, that the state of Israel has been created by Zionism, what are the moral and intellectual lessons that can be drawn from such a reality? Ellis argues that to be truthful to authentic Jewish values and ideals, one has to confront the meaning of the state of Israel: "An ever-growing displaced Palestinian people challenges the integrity of the State of Israel. The desire
to remain a victim is evidence of disease; yet to become a conqueror after having been a victim is a recipe for moral suicide.” [Ibid. p. 25] It is not clear whether Ellis, who is very courageous in his condemnation of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, calls for the dismantling of the state of Israel. This call is evident in the writings of the Palestinian Muslim thinker, the late Isma'il al-Faruqi, whose work will be reviewed later. It is clear, however, that the the Jewish Holocaust and other Holocausts, perpetrated by the Nazis on other nations in the 1930’s and 1940’s of this century have to be understood against the background of modern Western European history; and that Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims have not been part of that historical situation.

Ellis comes to the understanding that modern Palestinian history, as part of the modern history of the Muslim world, has been subjugated to Western powers and interests in the form of colonialism and cultural Westernization. What disturbs Ellis and other conscientious Jewish thinkers is, perhaps, the great harm that has been done, mainly, to the peasant society of Palestine as a result of the creation of Israel in 1948. He, for instance, further sees a relevance of the situation prevalent in peasant societies in Latin America to that of Palestinian society because of their similar social and economic formations and conditions.

With his commitment to Judaism and the struggle of the marginalized people of the globe, who in fact constitute the majority of the world population, Ellis affirms his true identity as well as his authentic human outlook. He further calls for a Jewish theology of liberation which is humanistic, universal, loving, and truly emancipating: “A Jewish theology of liberation recognises that the world has changed and that by simply applying pre-Holocaust and Holocaust categories to the contemporary world we close our eyes and ears to the pain and possibility of the present. By carrying our own history we bequeath insight to contemporary struggles.” [p. 121].

In his more recent work on the same subject, Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power, Ellis develops the theme of the Arab– Israeli conflict and the stand of contemporary Jewish theology. He formulates his theologico-political position in light of the following assumptions:

(1) What Jews have done to the Palestinians since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 is wrong.

(2) In the process of conquering and displacing the Palestinian people, Jews have done what has been done to us over two millennia.

(3) In this process Jews have become almost everything we loathe about our oppressors.
It is only in this confrontation with state power in Israel that Jews can move beyond being victim or oppressor.

The movement beyond victimization and oppression can only come through a solidarity with those whom we as Jews have displaced—the Palestinian people.” [p. xv].

In the first chapter, “The Birth of Holocaust Theology”, Ellis examines critically the work of three leading and contemporary Holocaust theologians: Elie Wiesel; Emil Fackenheim, and Rabbi Irving Greenberg. Two events have shaped the epistemological underpinnings of the work of these theologians: the Holocaust, and the Israeli Victory over three Arab states in the 1967 war. Ellis tells us that “[f]or Holocaust theologians the victory in the Six-Day War was a miracle, a sign that an innocent people so recently victimized might be on the verge of redemption”. [p. 3]

Wiesel, for instance, views the 1967 Israeli victory as a moral victory of the Jewish people. Israeli soldiers are seen to have behaved in a humane way, and, if Israelis turn out to be killers, it is the fault of the Arabs. Or in the words of the ex-Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, as quoted by the author: “Some day we will forgive the Arabs for killing our boys but we can never forgive them for turning our boys into killers.”

Fackenheim, a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto/Canada, also applauds the Israeli victory of 1967 since Israelis responded to “the commanding voice of Auschwitz”. [p. 14] In other words, the Arabs, according to Fackenheim, missed the chance of perpetrating another Holocaust on the Jewish people, mainly because Israel was able to avert it. From his side, Rabbi Greenberg, Ellis tells us, is convinced that the Israeli reunification (better read as the occupation of Arab Jerusalem) “symbolizes the presence of God and the continuation of the [Jewish] people”. [p. 16] Greenberg is more keen than the former two about the political reconstitution of the state of Israel. To him, any criticism of the state of Israel is necessarily the work of anti-Semitism. Ellis tells us that Greenberg considers the Intifada a new type of war waged by the Palestinian people against the divine state of Israel. From Greenberg’s perspective the basic fact is that the Palestinians are waging war. Though clearly Israel has superior military strength and the methods of Palestinian resistance physically endanger few Israelis, the situation is warlike insofar as the goals of the uprising are the destruction of Israel by “attacking its legitimacy, its support, its capacity to defend itself”. [P. 25]

Ellis contends that Jewish theology a la mode of Weisel, Fackenheim, and Greenberg is inadequate for coming to terms with the present dilemmas of Jews and Judaism, mainly because of its ahistorical character. The solution
is, therefore, to examine the whole problem of the Holocaust and the question of the emergence of Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel against their historical, social, and political background. Therefore, to Ellis' mind, Israel, Zionism, and "unethical" Jewish activities are not immune to criticism. In this context, Ellis attempts to examine the suffering of the Palestinian people after the great historical rupture of their society in 1948.

It is the contention of Ellis and other Jewish "dissenters" that the Holocaust has been "used as a powerful tool by Israeli and Jewish leadership in the United States to organize and police the Jewish community. Diaspora Jews, for example, are made to feel guilty for not having done enough to prevent the Holocaust; at the same time the message is conveyed that Israel is threatened with annihilation". [p. 36] Ellis maintains that the mainstream Holocaust theology has identified Palestinians with Nazis, an assumption that leads "to hysterical responses rather than reasoned policy". [p. 37]

Ellis views Zionism, a Jewish movement of national liberation, against its historical background in nineteenth-century Europe. He suggests that classical "Zionism was less a response to anti-Jewishness . . . than to the challenge of [Western] liberalism and nationalism". [p. 42] In the interwar period, and as a result of the increasing power of Nazism in Germany, Jews opted for political Zionism rather than for cultural Zionism. But still, on the basis of analysing key ideas of important Zionist thinkers of the time—Arendt, Magnes, and Ahad Ha'am—the author maintains: "The desire of a minority of the Jewish people for return to the land is bound more to culture and education and less to nationality and statehood." [p. 54] Ellis questions the notion that the pro-statist (pro-Israel) view is dominant in Jewish circles: "If it is true that Jews have inherited the formative events of Holocaust and Israel, it is also true that a difficult and often painful dissent has accompanied these events and awaits a renewed hearing." [p. 55]

But Jewish dissent has been peripheralized and "stricken from Jewish history, erased from its inheritance". Zionism has understood the enormous influence the mass media can exert in technologically-advanced societies. The creation and sustenance of the state of Israel has been nourished by the great support the mainstream Western mass media has lent it. Ellis testifies to this by quoting a Russian-born American Jewish journalist, William Zukerman (d. 1961), who says:

To this observer, nothing demonstrates more sharply the uncanny power of modern propaganda to control minds, sway emotions and brutalize people than the Zionist propaganda on the Arab refugees during the last decade. It literally succeeded in turning black into white, a blatant lie into a truth, a grave social injustice into an act of
justice glorified by thousands. It has turned clever people with more than average intelligence into starry-eyed fools, believing everything they are told, and has converted kindly and gentle men and women with a strong sense of mercy into fanatics, insensible to the suffering of any people except their own. In no other way can this writer explain the many paradoxes which the Arab refugee problem has created in Jewish life. [p. 64]

Ellis also relies on the analysis provided by Jacob Neusner, famous for his writings on Jewish theology and philosophy, who discusses the intellectual climate in the state of Israel: "Neusner exposes the 'poorly kept secret' that Israeli scholarship is dull and boring and that since Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem (both born in Germany) Israel has not produced a single scholar in theology, philosophy, or history who is important outside of Israel. Further, Israel is a client state dependent economically and militarily on the United States." Neusner concludes: "So much for being a Jew in the State of Israel. Here in the Diaspora we can be what we want, when we want—from nothing to everything, all the time or once in a while. Freedom is nice, too. And the United States really has become a free country for us Jews. For American Jews—Jewish Americans—the American dream has come true. I wonder how many Israelis think the Zionist one has come true, too." [p. 70]

Seen in a historical perspective, the Palestinian Uprising is a reflection of the repressed Palestinian suffering over the years, especially since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In other words, Ellis appreciates the inner dynamics of Palestinian society under occupation and its ability to generate movements of protest and defiance against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Ellis admonishes contemporary mainstream Jewish theology because "there is a noticeable absence of Palestinians". Palestinians are banished, frozen in Israeli national memory, and Jew who dare stir up that memory will be accused of being an anti-Semite, a lover of the Arabs, and a self-hater.

In a chapter entitled, "Holocaust, Israel and Christian Renewal", [pp. 134—155], Ellis discusses the attitude of some twentieth-century Christian theologians on the State of Israel and the Palestinians. He starts with the views expressed by the famous American theologian Reinohld Niebuhr, who, turning away from his socialist ideas of the 20's and 30's, espoused the mainstream and conservative attitude vis-à-vis the indigenous population of Palestine, and for that matter Muslims as a whole. Niebuhr is quoted by Ellis as saying that: "One difficulty with the Arab problem is that the technical and dynamic civilization which the Jews might have helped to introduce and
which should have the support of American capital, and which would include river-development, soil-conservation and use of native [read as slave] power. would not be acceptable to the Arab chieftains though beneficial to the Arab masses. It would have therefore to be imposed provisionally, but would have a chance of ultimate acceptance by the masses.” [p. 136]

It is ironic that Niebuhr, the most perceptive Christian theologian of the twentieth century, was insensitive to the plight of Palestinian Arabs—Christians and Muslims alike. In the words of Ellis, “Niebuhr saw Jewish Palestine and Christian Lebanon as islands of Western civilization confronted by the hopeless picture of an Arab-Moslem Middle East.” [p. 136] Ellis discusses the ideas of another leading contemporary Christian theologian, Paul Van Buren, a former professor of religion at Temple University, Philadelphia, who commented on Israel’s victory in the 1967 war saying: “We are witnesses today to the opening of a new era in the continuing life of God’s people.” [p. 142]

In the course of his illuminating analysis, Ellis dwells on the inspiring work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman Ruether’s The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict (1989). He says: “By analyzing Zionist and Palestinian history, Ruether concludes that the chief impediment to peace has not been historically and is not today the Palestinian people but an expansionist and violent state of Israel.” [p. 148]

In conclusion, Ellis is one of the few contemporary Jewish thinkers and theologians who have criticised the policies of the State of Israel for the sake of pursuing what they see as truth. It is, perhaps, surprising to see such a courageous Jewish voice in an age when powerful American Jewish institutions and personalities have lent their uncritical (and unflinching?) support to Israel.

In Islam and the Problem of Israel, the late Professor al-Faruqi tackles issues similar to those raised by Ellis. His point of departure is the modern historical situation of the Christian West, Israel, and Islam. Al-Faruqi presents the following presuppositions: 1) the Jewish problem, as it has been known so far, is an exclusive European, i.e., Christian problem, and it has to be understood against the religious, social, and historical background of medieval and modern Europe; 2) in the same vein, Zionism was created in Europe as a result of the unique circumstances the Jewish people faced in the nineteenth and first-half of twentieth centuries; 3) Israel is a unique and aggressive form of Western colonialism, and 4) the danger posed by the existence of the State of Israel is colossal—far from endangering Palestinian society alone, Israel poses a real threat to the security and safety of Arabs
and Muslims at large. The following quotation illustrates the basic meanings that have to be drawn from al-Faruqi's work: "The problem of Israel confronting the Muslim world today has neither precedent nor parallel in Islamic history. The Muslim world has tended to regard it as another instance of modern colonialism, or at best, as a repetition of the Crusades. The difference is not that Israel is neither one of these; but that it is both and more, much more." [p. 1]

Al-Faruqi follows a line of analysis, common to many who wrote on the encounter between Judaism and Christianity, by arguing that two features mark the modern Jewish experience: anti-Semitism and assimilation. He confirms an idea of Ellis' that the American experiment, in particular, has welcomed Jews as an ethnic and religious culture, and that, fundamentally speaking, there is no contradiction between the American brand of modernity and Judaism.

Born in the context of nineteenth-century Europe and in reaction to Jewish assimilation, Zionism opted to create an independent homeland for the Jewish people. Al-Faruqi goes on to argue that one has to see the birth of Zionism in the context of colonialist and expansionist Europe as well. He maintains that the "interests of Zionism coincided beautifully with the imperialist interests of France and England. Both these colonial powers were embroiled in a desperate fight with the Muslim natives of their colonies everywhere." [p. 72] Therefore, the state of Israel, as a political embodiment of Zionism, "would like nothing better than a role in world affairs which guarantees its occupation of the land and expands it, strengthens its state to the point of invincibility, and nurtures the Jewish hatred of all non-Jews, the Jewish persecution complex, and Jewish racism on which Zionism had rested the whole being and existence of Jews in the age of romanticism." [p. 72]

Al-Faruqi contends that both Islam and Judaism are theologically compatible. Both affirm the divine principle of *Dīn al-Fīṭrah* or religio *naturalis*, are united by the principle of revelation, and share the same religious tradition of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, etc. He says: "Islam . . . is the best friend Judaism has ever had." It recognised Judaism as religion *de jure*, which no other religion or political system ever did. It not only tolerated the observance of the Torah but demanded it; and it placed its executive power at the disposal of the rabbinic court. In this, Islam has gone farther than the Jews' fondest diaspora dream." [P. 90] As A Muslim Palestinian thinker, al-Faruqi is troubled, not so much by Judaism as a religion or Jews as a nation, but by Zionism, since, to him, it committed a "long list of crimes against the individual Palestinian men and women, against the corporate existence of the Palestinians, against the individual
Arabs of the surrounding countries as well as the umma". [p. 93] He goes on to argue that the Israeli state has to be dismantled—its army and public institutions. However, dismantling, does not necessarily mean the destruction of Jewish lives and properties. Al-Faruqi maintains that Islam safeguards Jewish lives, and that the best solution to the Jewish problem lies in permitting Jews to settle anywhere in Muslim lands. Those who desire to do so have to de-Zionize themselves.

Al-Faruqi considers contemporary Zionism to have failed on several fronts: (1) failure to provide security to all Jews, and this evidenced by the fact that the majority of world Jewry still lives outside of Israel; (2) failure to stop assimilation—most Jews are secular; and (3) the failure of Zionism to enable Judaism to blossom forth. In this regard, al-Faruqi draws on the basic assumption of the American Jewish theologian, Jacob Nuesner, quoted above, that Zionism has not inspired any major movement in philosophy, literature, the sciences, and the arts:

To this day, the world of scholarship knows of no Jewish social sciences, of no Jewish Humanities. In the realm of thought, Zionist Jews are tailing the West in all fields. Indeed, Zionist theory itself has been formulated in Hegelian terms. Even in Biblical Studies, Zionism has been led by Western Scholarship... The same is true of other domains of thought. The universities and colleges of Israel do not as yet know of a Jewish sociology, a Jewish anthropology, philosophy, political sciences or economics. All that is being taught and written by Jewish intellectuals stands squarely within the Western tradition. [P. 103]

In the context of Ellis’ and al-Faruqi’s major theses, I would like to examine a very short and, to my mind, controversial piece, written by the Canadian author Ronald Nettler.

In *Past Trials and Present Tribulations*, Nettler’s objective is to portray the Islamic doctrinal dimension of Muslim—Jewish relations. His explicit assumption is that Muslims have developed a sophisticated and rich doctrine of hatred towards Jews since the foundation of the Islamic state during the Prophet’s time in CE 622. Undoubtedly, Nettler’s assumptions are bounded by an interest context, and subjectivity. It is my contention, drawing on Ellis’ and al-Faruqi’s arguments, that his main interest is to justify the hegemonic and colonialist nature of the state of Israel. Since his context is that of the Israeli scholarship, which is antagonistic to Arabism and Islam, his personal interest would be to show that the real problem is not between Christendom/Europe and Judaism, but between Islam and Judaism.
Nettler does not make any analytical distinction between Judaism, Zionism, and Israel. He considers Zionism to be the product of Judaism and Israel the culmination of both. Understood in this light, if Muslims oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestine, they, then, oppose both Zionism and Judaism.

As stated by Ellis and al-Faruqi earlier, Zionism and the Jewish Holocaust have to be understood against the socio-economic, political, and nationalist-chauvinistic European background of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. The European persecution of Jews did not only culminate in the Holocaust but in the creation of Israel too. The writer is oblivious to this significant historical phenomenon, and, instead, he considers the West to be the true liberator of the Jews for supporting the creation of the state of Israel.

Unlike Ellis and al-Faruqi, Nettler cannot see the anomalous consequences that the creation of Israel has brought upon Palestinian society—its total disintegration and the dispersal of its people. What he discusses, instead, is the alleged “darker side of Jewish life under Islam, which redefined the erstwhile conception of Islamic ‘toleration’ as having been more problematic than could before have been imagined”. (p. ix) With no historical evidence in hand, the writer rushes to prove the “evil Muslim treatment of the Jews”.

Nettler aims at proving his thesis of “Muslim animosity to Jews” by treating some of the works of the leading Egyptian Muslim thinker, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). He uncritically accepts Wilfrd Cantwell Smith’s argument that “the modern period of Islamic history . . . begins with decadence within, intrusion and meance without; and the worldly glory that reputedly went with obedience to God’s law only a distant memory of happier days”. He argues, in an absolute manner, that the West has nothing to do, directly or indirectly, with the “decline” of Islam in the modern world. Yet, Modern Islam, in the writer’s view, suffers from a fundamental malaise? The only justifiable explanation, then, has to be sought within the Islamic religion.

Nettler proposes that the leaders of modern Islamic resurgence, and in particular Sayyid Qutb, propagated an “emotional hatred which [is] uniquely modern as part of Muslim thinking on the Jews”. (P. 51) To him, this supposed Muslim hatred is a metaphysical a priori—it is fixed, absolute, and unchanging, and beyond the rules of history.

Nettler does not treat Qutb’s ideas in their totality—as a comprehensive dynamic. Instead, he singles out one dimension of his thought—his stand on Zionism and the State of Israel. To better understand Qutb’s ideas, one has to relate them to the influence of foreign powers on the leading
Egyptian intelligentsia of the thirties, forties and fifties. Early in his professional career as a man of letters in the late thirties, Qutb wrote a number of articles on colonialism and Westernization. He linked these two phenomena to the British attempt to create a state for the Jews in Palestine. Nettler does not refer to these significant phases in the history of the Middle East—colonialism and the creation of Israel. He treats the Qutbian "doctrine of hatred towards the Jews" in an absolute political, and historical vacuum.

Qutb's philosophy, which is succinctly summarized in his main works *Islam and Social Justice* (1948) and *The Battle Between Islam and Capitalism* (1951), placed him at the centre of Egyptian intellectual life during that period. He was never a neutral interpreter of events, but an engaged theologian, philosopher, and social thinker. His social commitments equaled his political and theological concerns. It was quite natural for him, therefore, to respond, analytically at least, to one of the main dangers that the Muslim world was facing—Western colonization and its culmination in the creation of the state of Israel. Qutb's theoretical formulations were very much shaped by those practical concerns.

In conclusion, a critical perspective on the debates raging between Palestinians/Arabs/Muslims, on the one hand, and Jews/Israelis on the other over the existence of the state of Israel is urgently needed. These debates have not taken the form of dialogue yet. The available literature could allow us to convert our confrontational stands to those of dialogue and understanding.