

# Reviews

This book by the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, though relatively slight in length, is inwardly rather complex. It can be read at several levels: biographical, historical, political, theological-ethical.

Munib Younan comes from, as he indicates, “a family of refugees.” Both of his own parents as well as his wife’s father were displaced from their homes by the events surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. He grew up in the Old City of Jerusalem, across the no-man’s-land from the modern Jewish city. He reports that during his whole childhood and youth, he did not meet any Jew. Muslims, however, were his friends and companions from the first. It is this shared experience, it seems, which has enabled Bishop Younan to maintain close relations with Muslims and Muslim leaders throughout his career. As he quotes them as saying, “He is one of us.”

Younan attended a Lutheran school in the Old City, and at some point experienced a call to become a pastor. Through a scholarship offered by persons in Finland interested in outreach to Palestine, he gained the opportunity to study social service work in Finland, and was able to extend his stay to do a degree in theology as well. He relates a touching incident when he had to visit the Israeli embassy to request an extension of his travel documents. The Israeli official said, “Young man, I want to help you because you are a Christian. In Italy, members of the Catholic church hid me and saved my life. If it were not for the Christians, I would not be here.”

Younan’s first experience of organized inter-religious dialogue also took place overseas. The young Palestinian pastor had the opportunity to attend Christian-Jewish-Muslim consultations sponsored by various organizations in Sweden, Switzerland, and Greece. Following the first of these in 1990, as he says, “We agreed to continue the dialogue at home, in Israel and Palestine.” This was the start of a series of discussions that have continued, through many difficulties, right down to the present time.

Biographically, the book is quite effective; one gets a real sense of the author as a person, a pastor, and an activist. The broader historical elements of the book also provide much useful information, for example in explaining the origins of the conflicting claims of the various Christian groups in Jerusalem. His telling of history, however – as in any history-telling? – is selective and strongly reflects his own perspective. In dealing with trends in the Arab world during the past century, he acknowledges that for much of this time, a “pan-Arab” mentality prevailed, without more particular identities within that framework being given any particular importance; only more recently did a distinct “Palestinian” sense of identity develop. On the other hand, he claims as Palestinian anyone who has ever dwelt in the area, including such ancient figures as Origen, Eusebius, and Cyril of Jerusalem. In fact, he takes it back much further: “We see our roots,” he writes, “as going back also to the Canaanites and Philistines.” This wins decisively the question of “who came first,” and leaves the Jews, even in biblical times, in the role of interlopers – which of course is exactly how the Arab world sees modern Zionism.

Bishop Younan reminds us that what the Israelis celebrate on Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day), the Palestinians mourn as al-Nakba, “the Catastrophe.” It goes without saying that he identifies unreservedly with the sufferings of his people. Yet he also warns against a “victim” mentality, and proposes instead what he calls a “constructive nationalism,” though he does not develop this concept systematically. He expresses real sympathy for the sufferings and the aspirations of Israelis as well. One can see in this book the roots of the position that Bishop Younan has expressed as recently as in his address, by telephone from Jerusalem, to the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Orlando. “It is my fervent prayer,” he said, “that my children and grandchildren will one day live side by side with their Israeli sisters and brothers in a just peace.” He added: “We care about the security of Israel, but believe that the security of Israel is dependent on freedom and justice for the Palestinians. And freedom and justice for the Palestinians is dependent on security for Israel.”

That is an admirably balanced statement, even though the net effect of Bishop Younan’s interventions has been to encourage the ELCA to adopt positions that tilt strongly toward the Palestinian side. One has to ask whether it is the responsibility of a church body simply to respond from the heart to the outcries of those to whom it is closest (in this case, fellow Lutherans), or whether it is not necessary to step back and engage in a process of social-ethical reasoning that seeks input from both sides and seeks to balance conflicting claims, while being willing to criticize both parties. There has been a tendency to move too quickly from ecclesiastical solidarity to the adoption of a political position.

Returning to Bishop Younan’s own explication of the needed Christian witness today, it is odd that he, as a Lutheran, identifies that witness so unambiguously with “nonviolence,” a term that occurs very frequently in the book. He does not argue for this equation, but simply assumes it, almost as if to say: “If you have read the Sermon on the Mount, how can you think otherwise?” One might think one is reading a treatise emanating from the Church of the Brethren – an honorable tradition, but surely very different from the Lutheran one. There is no hint of his having wrestled with classic or contemporary just war or justifiable-use-of-force moral reasoning.

One could perhaps understand this as a situational pacifism: given the ravages that violence has inflicted on both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, how could a Christian not simply cry out against it? This would imply that in other times and places, the Christian response might be different. Or one could perhaps understand Younan’s position as a vocational pacifism: when there are those in both the Muslim and Jewish communities all too ready to embrace violence, it becomes the specific calling of Christians to point to another way. In this case, his espousal of nonviolence could be viewed as an implicit condemnation not only of the violence of the Israeli occupation, but also of suicide bombings, or even of the Palestinian “armed struggle” as a whole. If so, this would truly be a prophetic sword that cuts both ways. Or the term “nonviolence” might be viewed as an equivalent to “politics,” signifying all those other, more civil ways of arriving at social consensus and policy formation. This could be a major component in his proposed “constructive” nationalism. But the author does not explicate these matters; one is left to wonder what his further thinking on them might be.

Younan does deal forthrightly with one issue that, in any analysis, has been one of the major obstacles to peace: the tendency on both sides to accept and even deliberately foster negative stereotypes of the other. “Walls of animosity and divisiveness are still being erected between our two peoples,” he says. “Stigmatizations, prejudices, demonization of the other, and violence are still the common language.” He calls for changes in school curricula, on both sides, to exclude both national and religious triumphalism, and urges interfaith exchanges among clergy, lay adults, youth, and children.

The chapter “Witness in the Land” is a valuable contribution to the vexed subject of a “theology of land” that has been figured prominently in Jewish-Christian dialogue. In acknowledged dependence on the work of Walter Brueggeman, Naim Ateek, and others, he offers a deconstruction, in effect, of the biblical conquest narratives. Noting that they were put into their present form only centuries later, he suggests that the later writers “were intent on justifying their own status in the land on the basis of nationalistic perspectives.” He urges us to read the Pentateuch in the light of the prophets. The land is a gift, not a right, and one which brings with it obligations, most particularly to practice justice and to dwell equitably with the stranger.

Younan makes some remarkably non-supersessionist statements vis-a-vis the Jewish people. “Our place in the land,” he writes, “is not as a replacement for the people of the old covenant, but as coheirs and coinhabitants who are called to live together in peace.” He offers mini-essays on “The Gifts of Judaism” and “The Gifts of Islam,” stressing the depths of spirituality in each tradition and providing a kind of primer on their respective histories, beliefs, and practices.

Prof. Fred Strickert of Wartburg College, himself a prolific writer on the Middle East, is listed as editor of the book. One is naturally curious as to just what his role was in assembling its constituent parts or in giving it its final form, but that information is not provided. In any case, this is a significant volume, well worth the attention of anyone concerned with the political and/or religious situation in the area.

— Franklin Sherman, an Associate for Interfaith Relations in the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

© September 2005  
Journal of Lutheran Ethics (JLE)  
Volume 5, Issue 9