

Religion and Peace
by Ilan Pappé¹

The Oslo process is seen now by more and more scholars around the world as a failure, as a game of diplomacy heralded as a “peace process” but one which on the ground has substituted one form of occupation by another. This book adds to our critical review of the Oslo Accord a dimension usually neglected by other works. It poses a simple question to which it provides an elaborate and informative answer: What is the role of religion in the way politics developed in the post-Oslo phase? The author is not concerned with religion as such; rather, he focuses on the messianic aspects of religion as they interplay with politics in the period beginning in 1993 and ending in 2000.

This is a study of religion as a current interpretation of reality by religious people. The interpretation may or may not be “authentic” or “correct” compared with what one thinks Islam or Judaism is all about, but it is definitely an interpretation that is appealing, and even exciting, to many in the region, particularly in Israel and Palestine. By this definition, religion is an adaptive and relevant actor in the political game of nationalism and conflict. Its power to excite and to influence in both Islam and Judaism stems from the infusion of “church” and state in religious theory and practice. Thus, in the case of Judaism, for example, this thesis forces the author to give us an elaborate and a learned introduction in which he traces political Jewish messianism in contemporary Israel to its religious sources. He also finds the same absence of secularism among Palestinians in particular. Religion is a way Muslims and Jews understand, absorb, and articulate religious precepts given the evolving political reality around them.

The interpretation of reality in the case of both religious groups before and after Oslo is described in this book as powerful, effective, and above all destructive, at least as far as the chances for peace in Palestine are concerned. The book juxtaposes the intentions of the Oslo architects and the American policymakers with the responses of the holders of various ideological viewpoints on the ground. Being a book written and published in Germany, it adds to this analysis a very fine description of the European Union reaction and contribution to the Oslo concept.

The author wisely connects the success of extreme religious viewpoints in playing a crucial role in Oslo to the basic flaws in the concept of the Oslo Accord and even more so to its implementation. From the very start, Oslo was not meant to end occupation, to grant Palestinians a sovereign state, or to solve the refugee problem and thus bring a lasting and comprehensive peace to Palestine. The author also doubts the wisdom of partition, both in a historical perspective and as a guiding line to the Oslo project.

In sum, on the shaky grounds of Oslo, a “secular peace” was attempted and failed. It collapsed because there were other concepts of peace offered by political forces that were considered long buried and left behind, according to modernization theories, in the region’s march into a secular, Westernized age. In fact, religious discourse and authority were employed simultaneously by these forces to defend the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on the Israeli side and to legitimize the war against that occupation and the State of Israel among the Palestinians.

¹ Ilan Pappé teaches history at Haifa University in Israel.

Both the insufficient way the semi-statehood of Yasir Arafat developed and the ambivalent and wavering nature of the Israel peace camp perpetuated an Oslo reality on the ground that had very little hope of moving forward, even according to the original Oslo plan (i.e., negotiation over the crucial questions of settlements, statehood, Jerusalem, and refugees). Furthermore, both the plan and the reality excluded the Palestinians in Israel, with severe repercussions, as demonstrated in the riots of October 2000. With the failure of Oslo, political religion gained strength as a way of resistance for Palestinians in Israel as elsewhere, and in the case of Israel, it provided justification for continued occupation and apartheid.

The author is aware—and mentions it—of not using “essentialist” descriptions of Islam or Judaism. He refers here mainly to the use particular nationalist groups were and are making of religion. He feels, though, that this kind of exploitation has a wide appeal because other political groups have been unable to present a viable alternative—which Oslo was not—to interpreting the conflict and the ways to resolve it in religious terms.

The author proposes a solution that he seems to regard as utopian for the moment. This is the making of a unitary secular state, where religion has a circumscribed role and it not used as a tool to impose political will and in which the outstanding problems of the conflict, such as the refugees and Jerusalem, can be solved within the whole territory of what used to be Mandatory Palestine.
