

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

Volume 3, Issue 1

2008

Article 6

FEATURE TOPICS:
THE LAND AND STATE OF ISRAEL
PAUL AND CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948-1967

REVIEW

Uri Bialer

***Cross on the Star of David:
The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948-1967***

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005, 233 pp.

Reviewed by Michael B. McGarry, Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem

Over the last few decades, scholarly interest in political relations between the Christian world and the State of Israel has focused primarily on the Roman Catholic Church's view of the Zionist movement (before the founding of the State) and its perceived slowness in establishing full diplomatic relations with the Jewish State. But here in his *Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948-1967*, Dr. Uri Bialer addresses the question in the opposite direction. Drawing on Israel's diplomatic history from 1948 to the 1967 war, Dr. Bialer traces the attitude and actions of the fledgling Jewish state towards the Christian world. Currently occupying the chair in International Relations – Middle East Studies in the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University, Dr. Bialer has opened up a seldom-addressed topic both fascinating and illuminating: In its first twenty years, how did the new-born State of Israel, in its foreign diplomacy and internal policies, address the Christian world?

Bialer, a perspicacious historian with the necessary language skills to analyze recently declassified (1980) Israeli governmental archives, recognizes and honors the complexity of his topic. He carefully notes the multiple factors affecting the new state's diplomats and policy makers in assessing their delicate but forceful formulation of policy towards the Christian world – both those Christians living in Israel and those countries, often overwhelmingly Christian, whose support the young state desperately needed, even and maybe especially after its United Nations' authorization. As he notes:

One of the most formidable problems that Israeli foreign policy faced from its early years was the stance of the Christian world. The attitudes of that world toward Zionism and Israel after the Second World War ranged widely, from the basic hostility and categorical nonrecognition of the Catholic Church through the general Protestant ambivalence toward Evangelical support. The overall effect of questioning legitimacy was certainly detrimental to the young state's foreign relations. (xi)

Bialer organizes his chapters sequentially around the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and the relatively small Protestant Churches in Israel.

With his singular access to Israeli sources, Bialer weaves his narrative through a series of factors, almost like icebergs floating in a sea, which influenced Israeli strategy: the weighty memory of Christian persecution of Jews (notably the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the *Shoah*); the perennial fear of Christian proselytizing; the uncharted undertaking of forging the *Jewish* character of the State while at the same time guaranteeing, at least from its Declaration of Independence (Israel does not have a constitution), freedom of religious expression for all citizens; the challenge of starting up a representative democracy by persons with little experience; a concern about how *Jewish* religious groups internally would benefit or suffer from privileges or rights demanded by the local Christian groups; an obsessive monitoring about how

Israeli actions vis-à-vis its own Christians would be viewed and then, perhaps, be used as a “wedge” in pressuring Israel; an ambivalence about the Christian presence in Israel that was overwhelmingly Arab (indeed, still today, 80% of the Christian community in Israel are Arab); the truly Byzantine relationships among various Christian communities within Israel and how these might be, alternately, respected and manipulated to Israel’s advantage; the issue of Christian ownership of land: who owns it, how do you prove it, and who can buy it; and finally how might taxes, building permits, and zoning codes be imposed on Christian communities?

While the above, perhaps dizzying, litany of issues affecting Israeli treatment of the Christian world may come off as abstract, let me recount one incident from Bialer’s book – at once colorful, dramatic, and complicated – that illustrates some of these concerns. In internal Israeli memos, the following episode was referred to as “Of Pigs and Men.”

In 1962, Israel passed a law that forbade raising pigs in most of the country. The Daughters of Charity, a French order of nuns, who oversaw a hospital for brain-damaged children in the Jerusalem suburb of Ein Kerem (and do so to this day), were ordered to get rid of their forty-plus pigs by a religious Deputy Minister of the Interior. The sisters countered that pork was the mainstay of the food for their charges; following this law would jeopardize their work, they complained. Further, they threatened to take the issue to the French government, with the inevitable exaggeration and amplification of the story en route (as one Israeli diplomat put it, “By the time the story about the pigs reaches Rome...there will be 300 of them”). Some of the nuns’ French allies claimed that this Israeli internal law ran counter to an existing French-Israeli agreement. So in November of 1963, “the prime minister, the minister of the interior, and the acting foreign minister decided that the order to round up and destroy the Ein Karem pigs would not be carried out as long as their meat was earmarked solely for internal consumption at the convent and thus ‘does not constitute a danger to the Jewish inhabitants of the country.’” (118f) While showing how small issues (at least from one perspective) can have multivalent meanings, this case study illustrates the multi-leveled complexity of Bialer’s theme.

Only two shortcomings mar this otherwise excellent study. First, like many authors who investigate the relationship of the Churches to the State of Israel, Bialer seems to be interested predominantly in the Roman Catholic Church. While one may wish for more space to be devoted to other Christian communities (and, to be fair, he does deal with almost all the Christian communities in Israel), Bialer reasonably spends most of his time on the Catholic Church. In addition to its size, the Catholic Church was pivotal to the kind of legitimacy and support which the State sought in the first twenty years of its existence – and this needed to come from countries with Catholic majorities. Second, Bialer’s book would have been better if he had had a native-English speaker’s editorial hand. Occasional awkward English constructions and missed Christian ecclesiastical subtleties would have been corrected by such friendly oversight.

Obviously to be included in the next chapters of this story would be Israel’s relation to the rise of Christian Zionism and then to the signing the Accords between the Holy See and the State of Israel, 1993-94. (For the latter, one should read Marshall Breger’s indispensable *The Vatican-Israel Accords: Political, Legal, and Theological Contexts*.) We can only hope that a book that would address the history since 1967 would find language skills, perspective, and judiciousness equal to those which Bialer amply displays in his history of the first twenty years. For those interested in the relationship between the Jewish state and the Christian world, this book is essential reading.