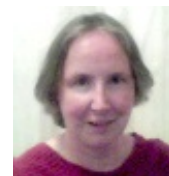


Book Review: Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East

Blog Admin

*Christianity arose from the lands of biblical Palestine and, regardless of its twentieth century association with the Arab-Israeli conflict, to Christians around the world it remains first and foremost the birthplace of Christianity. In this book, **Samuel J. Kuruvilla** argues that Christian Palestinians often employ politically astute as well as theologically radical means in their efforts to appear relevant as a minority community within Israeli and Palestinian societies. **Elaine Housby** finds that the book contains much valuable and interesting material which anyone who takes an interest in the situation of the Palestinians or in Arab Christianity will find helpful.*



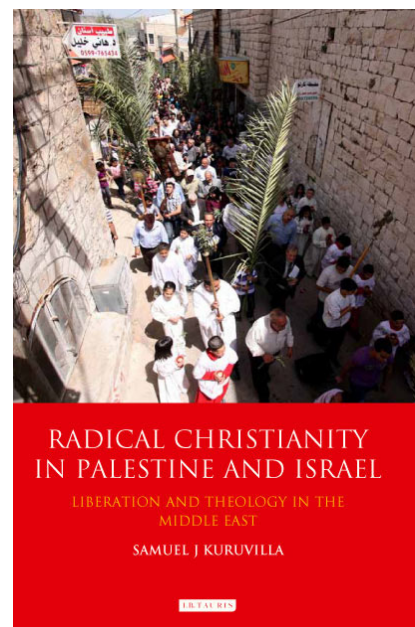
Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East. Samuel J Kuruvilla. I.B. Tauris. July 2012.

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This book is a discussion of radical Christian theology among Palestinians by an Indian Christian theologian. [Samuel J. Kuruvilla](#) comes from Kerala and brings his own experience of living as a member of a minority religious community to this study of Arab Christians living in an overwhelmingly Muslim environment.

The most ancient Christian communities of historical Palestine are the descendants of those who resisted conversion to Islam when it spread to the region after the seventh century. More recently the missionary efforts of foreign churches have created additional congregations following other denominational traditions. Over the last few decades both the absolute number and the proportion of Christians there has been decreasing as a result of emigration by Palestinians seeking to escape the pressures of life under occupation, with Christians sometimes finding it easier than Muslims to be accepted for residence in Western countries. Christians are now a minority community even in Beit Laham (Bethlehem), the literal birthplace of Christianity. Yet, as this book makes clear, they play a role in the Palestinian struggle out of proportion to their numbers, partly because the emotional attachment to the 'Bible lands' that is widespread in the Christian majority world can be politically leveraged.

Chapter One summarises the history of the region now usually known as Israel and the Palestinian Territories, both political and religious, and could usefully be read alone. Chapter Two discusses the origins of 'liberation theology' in Latin America, where activist priests developed a form of Christian thought which prioritised the struggle of the poor against a state construed as sinful. This radical doctrine spread to other societies who felt themselves oppressed, such as the Palestinians.



Kuruvilla mentions that many prominent Palestinian Christian activists studied in the United States and were very influenced by the African-American civil rights struggle. Christians involved in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, notably Desmond Tutu, were also a very important source of ideas. A little more detail about these various influences and how they came together in Palestine would have been welcome. Kuruvilla explains that Naim Ateek, a leading figure in radical Palestinian Christianity, adopted a policy of non-violence as a calculated political strategy and not just as a matter of moral principle. Martin Luther King made exactly the same calculation, but this comparison is never made explicitly by Kuruvilla.

The remaining chapters discuss the work of the leading Palestinian Christian activists. The main focus is on two figures: Naim Ateek, an Anglican priest resident in Jerusalem, and Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem. The greatest amount of space is devoted to the work of the Sabeel Centre, founded by Ateek, an institute oriented towards gaining support from overseas Christians through an intensive programme of conferences and visits, such as the popular tour which takes overseas Christians on a Palestinian Via Dolorosa, a 'road of suffering' modelled on Christ's journey to crucifixion. So much does Sabeel prioritise overseas support that it has been criticised for producing most of its material in English and very little in Arabic. Raheb founded the International Centre of Bethlehem, which has a greater focus on local residents and seeks to improve the educational and cultural opportunities available to them as a way of discouraging emigration.

The central dilemma for Palestinians in their relationship with the Bible is the story known as the Exodus Narrative, found in the Old Testament Book of Exodus. This is an account of how the ancient Hebrews were led out of slavery in Egypt and granted the land of Canaan to be their home, with divine permission to expel its original inhabitants. It is cited in justification of the foundation of the modern state of Israel by both religious Jews and Christian supporters of Israel.

Those who 'read the Bible through Canaanite eyes', to use a phrase often employed by Palestinian Christians, find it impossible to accept this interpretation of the Exodus story but differ in their solution to the problem. Ateek chooses to emphasise the doctrine that for Christians the universalist message of the New Testament has superseded the more narrowly ethnically based account of the Old Testament. Raheb prefers to argue that the giving of the Ten Commandments to the ancient Hebrews was more important than the grant of land; he supports a two-state solution where modern Israelis are permitted to enjoy the possession of a portion of Canaan in return for their observance of the moral code embodied in the Commandments, which in his view would preclude much of their treatment of the Palestinians to date.

While overseas Christians usually concentrate on the doctrinal disagreements between Christians and Jews, local Palestinian Christians stress that the spiritual encounter with Muslims is their inter-faith priority. The earliest developments of radical Palestinian Christian theology took place in the Al-Liqa ('meeting') Centre, a space for discussion between Christians and Muslims. Interestingly, Ateek has said (p.115) that the experience of Muslims living as minorities in the West is a valuable contribution to this process of inter-faith dialogue. In this he reminds us that Christians in the East and Muslims in the West suffer from the same problems of being perceived as culturally alien and suspected of being loyal to foreign powers.

Although the chapter headings of the book indicate an orderly progression from historical background to theological discussion, there are frequent excursions into historical and political comment during the theological analysis which are sometimes rather confusing. The author's use of tenses is highly eccentric; he habitually uses the simple past tense where the perfect or even the present would be correct, which in some cases makes it impossible to be sure whether the situation described is entirely in the past or is continuing in the present. Since the book's discussion of the historical development of its subject is one of its strengths, this lack of clarity is especially unfortunate. In a number of cases tenses are clearly incorrect even within quotations, which suggests that these quotations have been either translated or edited by the author, without any acknowledgement of this being made in the notes.

The main limitation on the book's appeal is that Kuruvilla seems to be writing more for fellow theologians than for the general reader and assumes considerably greater knowledge of Christian scripture and doctrine than many readers are likely to have. This is a shame, because the book contains much valuable and interesting material which anyone who takes an interest in the situation of the Palestinians or in Arab Christianity will find helpful.

Elaine Housby has a Masters degree in Politics and Sociology from Birkbeck College, London, a Masters degree in Modern Middle East Studies from St Anthony's College, Oxford and a PhD from the Open University for a thesis in the field of Religious Studies. She is the author of *Islamic Financial Services in the UK* and *Islamic and Ethical Finance in the UK*, both published by Edinburgh University Press. [Read more reviews by Elaine.](#)

