Liberation Theology and Palestine


“For all we know, we still are the early church.” This thought-provoking insight, tweeted on social media recently, was attributed to the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. It was followed by a statement by American theologian Peter Leithart, “A millennium from now, everyone will be studying the Latin American and African ‘church fathers’ of the twenty-first century.” As Twitter users were quick to point out, ‘church mothers’ have always been, and still are, part of the equation. If Leithart is right, I have no doubt that Palestinian theologians such as Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, Jean Zaru, and Mitri Rahab will also be studied a millennium from now.

My hope is that the contemporary church in the west does not miss the opportunity to listen to these voices in this present moment and to act on what is heard. Naim Ateek’s *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* is a resource that presents a robust theology of liberation arising out of the context of Israel-Palestine. This is Ateek’s third monograph, complementing his earlier works: *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (1989) and *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation* (2008).

*A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* is a gracious, urgent, and compelling call to learn about “the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:4). This is not a book written from abstraction. Like other liberation theologies, it is deeply grounded in the realities of the Palestinian people who, since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, have experienced continual waves of erasure of identity, dispossession, and discrimination. Ateek’s own testimony bears witness to this dispossession:

In 1948, I was a boy living in Beisan, a Palestinian town of six thousand people close to the Jordan River. Beisan was a mixed town of Muslims and Christians and had a vibrant Christian community that belonged to three churches—Eastern Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic), and Anglican. I cherish fond memories of living in my hometown. It was a beautiful town blessed for its delicious fruits and vegetables.
It had fresh water springs flowing from the adjacent mountains irrigating people’s land and gardens. I still remember our garden and the variety of fruit trees my father planted and our family enjoyed.

Our life was turned upside down when the Zionist militias came into Beisan in May 1948 and occupied us. Many people were afraid and fled, while others remained in their homes. My father never wanted to leave. He begged the military commander to let us stay, but his military orders were clear. Everyone had to go. It was ethnic cleansing. We were forced out of our homes at gunpoint and were ordered to meet at the centre of town. The soldiers divided us into two groups, Muslims and Christians. The Muslims were sent to the country of Jordan, a few miles east of Beisan. The Christians were put on buses and driven to the outskirts of Nazareth, where they were dumped outside the city limits, never to be allowed to return home (pp. 1–2).

Ateek is an Anglican priest and the co-founder of Sabeel, an ecumenical, grassroots, liberation theology centre committed to developing Palestinian theology that can help to foster a just peace in Israel-Palestine (http://sabeel.org/). In this book, Ateek describes the origins of Palestinian liberation theology: how each week he sat with his congregation at St George’s Anglican Cathedral in East Jerusalem. Together they would read the Bible and apply it to their lives. The “aha” moment came when they realised that not only did they live in the land of Jesus’ earthly life, but that Jesus also knew what it was like to live under a military occupation. The quest for justice born from the liberating love of Christ, who taught non-violent resistance in the face of occupation, became the lens for viewing their discipleship.

The prominent biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote the foreword to A Palestinian Theology of Liberation. He describes the “double-bind” for Palestinians in terms of their immediate context and America's response, including from Christians:

The endlessly vexed circumstance of the ‘land of promise’ cries out for our attention while at the same time that circumstance defies any hope for peaceable and just outcomes.
The facts on the ground are sad enough. They are, however, made more intransigent by the grip of Israeli ideology that effectively defines that vexed circumstance for the Western imagination. Thus, almost all of the information (misinformation) that we receive in the West is filtered through Zionist ideological interest that holds in thrall much of the Christian community in the United States and consequently that holds in thrall US policy as well. In that articulation the current plight of Palestinians is kept invisible and the legitimate claims of Palestinians, grounded in historical and social reality, are left without articulation. In the face of that ideologically driven vexed circumstance Naim Ateek has been for a very long time an honest and faithful witness (p. xv).

Ateek’s “honest and faithful” witness in *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* reinforces his commitment to non-violent resistance. This is stated again and again in all his writings, and his latest book is no exception. Ateek’s vision is evident from the first page, where he dedicates the book to:

Jews, Muslims, Christians, and all people of goodwill who believe in the power of nonviolence and possess the courage to stand and act for justice and peace for all the people of the land, and especially for the liberation of the Palestinian people.

A vision of sharing the land based on human rights, and international law inspired by his Christian faith, the equality of all people and a commitment to justice and peace, permeates every page. This does not mean that this is a book of platitudes. Far from it. Ateek’s book is a call to action. The action takes the form of non-violent resistance that requires a collective response from both Palestinians and the global community—including people of faith.

*A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* is comprised of ten chapters and a list of resources. Ateek discusses a wide range of issues: Palestinian liberation theology in the context of other liberation theologies; the history of Palestinian Christians; and a Christocentric and love-based hermeneutic that is the foundation of his theology and scriptural interpretation.
In chapter 6, Ateek brings to the surface the polyphonic nature of the Hebrew Scriptures, demonstrating that an ethnocentric mandate found in some portions of Scripture should not be used to dictate geo-political decisions in the present. Furthermore, he counter-balances the divine edicts concerning genocide of those in the land of Canaan with portions of the Hebrew Scriptures that offer an inclusive and peaceful vision. Ateek discusses the texts in the Torah that are used to undermine human rights and to claim Palestinian land. He argues that there is an ethical imperative attached to how we read portions of the Torah where the text contains edicts for the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and expulsion from their lands.

He goes further in chapter 10, where he discusses what we mean when we say “this is the word of the Lord” after a violent Bible reading has been read aloud in our churches (p. 141). Ateek’s readers can make up their own mind on his stance on this. However, this point should not overshadow a reading of Ateek’s entire work. Ateek is not the first Christian to grapple with the “God of war” versus the “God of peace” in the Old Testament. Rather than letting go of the Old Testament altogether, he applies his hermeneutic of justice for all and love of God and neighbour, thereby magnifying a vision of God who welcomes all to God’s holy mountain (Psalm 87).

Chapter 8 discusses the realities of life for Palestinians, and includes an unwavering call for justice that can be achieved through non-violent resistance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Ateek outlines the irreconcilable tensions of Israel being a democratic state whilst maintaining a military occupation. This chapter provides a good summary of the two-state solution, the one-state solution, and a third solution of a bi-national state where, with the help of the United Nations, a partnership might be agreed upon where “two national entities would retain their unique identities but would live together and share the whole land” (p. 114).

My critique of Ateek’s work is that in his endorsement of Jesus as a Palestinian in the first century living under Roman occupation, he makes reference to, but does not explicitly state, Jesus’ Jewish identity. A Christian imagination can be large enough both to affirm the Jewish Jesus of Nazareth and to reject anti-Judaism that mars Christian tradition, whilst still critiquing the policies and practices of the Israeli government.

*A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* is a valuable resource for all who would wish to learn more about Palestinian liberation theology. Moreover, it is a valuable resource for developing a political theology that is inclusive.
in its vision for the future of Palestine and Israel. Ateek demonstrates that Palestinian liberation theology is not only aligned with other Christian liberation theologies, but it is derived from the all-embracing love of God seen clearly in the face of Jesus Christ.

Ateek states that a Palestinian theology of liberation has four mandates: working for peace and justice based on truth, mercy, and reconciliation; raising awareness internationally of a peaceful and just way forward in Israel-Palestine; fostering a commitment to interfaith relationships; and promoting an ecumenical outlook. A Palestinian Theology of Liberation embodies these four mandates while also providing a work of Christian theology that demonstrates what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ committed to non-violence, justice, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

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The Europeans in Australia


Alan Atkinson's three-volume Europeans in Australia has been acclaimed—and justly, in this reviewer's opinion—as the successor to Manning Clark's panoramic and monumental multi-volume account of Australian history, A History of Australia (1962–87). As with Clark's magnum opus, Europeans in Australia is the fruit of a lifetime of thoughtful research and teaching of Australian history. Like the first two volumes, this is history presented as a rich, colourful tapestry: in closeup scenes of individuals, groups and movements there are vignettes that allow for rich, intimate details of Australians' lives ('issues of local geography and local talk,' as Atkinson puts it, p. 416); at the same time, we are enabled to stand back to see broader patterns and