

## CHRISTIANITY IN THE HOLY LAND

by DAVID B. BURRELL

*Tantur Papers on Christianity in the Holy Land*, Edited by D.-M.A. Jaeger (Studia Oecumenica Hierosolymitana, Vol. 1), Jerusalem, Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research (Tantur), 1981.\*

This hefty volume presents the papers given at the Tantur conference launching the Institute's study project on Christianity in the Holy Land (1979), with the editor's opening address intended to serve as an introduction to the volume. The scope of the papers, with their uniformly high quality — despite disparity of mode, some more historical and some more reflective — manages in fact to do justice to the topic. And that is a notable achievement, given the disparities among Christian communities in this land, as well as their delicate position between an established Islam and an ingathering Judaism.

The more theological essays — by Laurenz Volken (Dormition), Yves de Brouker (Latroun), Frans Bouwen (St. Anne), Pierre Lenhardt and Marcel Dubois, as well as Kenneth Cragg — each display the sensitivity and nuance which only experience can bring. In fact, Cragg's reflection combines commitment with equanimity in ways one would hardly believe possible, and is a must for those more inclined towards an Israeli perspective; while Volken's, de Brouker's and Dubois' should be read by Christians more preoccupied with Palestinian concerns. For each displays clearly how theological analysis can be employed to dissolve stereotypes. And given the sway of ideologies over this land, it is refreshing to feel theology being used to cut through them.

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\*Available from the Ecumenical Institute, at P.O.B. 19556, 91194 Jerusalem, for \$30.

The more historical essays — by Frederic Manns, Pau Figueras, Richard Rose, Kirsten Pederson, Wesley Brown, Coos Schoneveld, and Ole Kvarme — offer resident and visitor alike windows on the legacy of two thousand years of passionate presence on the part of every Christian complexion history has spawned. Pierre Lenhardt outlines the unique opportunity offered to Christian self-understanding by opening itself to the study of rabbinic commentary, and so profiting by the presence of a live Jewish tradition in our midst. In the final essay, Khalil Samir, from the Orientalium in Rome, makes a similar plea for a concerted study of the Arab Christian tradition — alone in negotiating an ecumenical existence for more than a thousand years. His carefully documented essay outlines the unique position this community has held within an Islamic world, one strikingly parallel to that of Jews in the west, though enjoying (as did oriental Jewry) the statutory tolerance of Muslim law.

The overall effect of these essays is enlightenment, and a salutary wonder at the patience and modesty of these interlocutors before the stubborn yet sublime realities to which they are trying to do justice. Yet their quest for understanding displays that passion so endemic to the Middle East as well, so testifying their assimilation to a world which they have, for the most part, freely embraced. For only two of the authors can acknowledge being born in the midst of these realities, and while Samir embraces this fact: “Si nous sommes Arabes, ce n’est pas par accident, mais c’est par grace de Dieu. Et si nous sommes chrétiens, ce n’est par hasard, mais c’est par grace de Dieu” (428); Jaeger must relegate his origins “to the accidents of birth and upbringing” (80), and this fact distinguishes the editor’s long introduction from all the other essays of the book.

The modesty and manifest experience of the contributors contrasts with its overstatement and pretended knowing; their nuance and equilibrium, with his dogmatic assertion and the fiction of a lone spokesman for “Christian theologians who follow the traditional Christian beliefs” (70). The bullying style will warn critical readers that they are being served more certainty than is humanly possible. Yet the confident tone, linked with a self-confessed *Roman* Catholicism, might mislead some into believing such *obiter dicta* to reflect a definite policy — of Tantur? of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity? For what other than “official policy” could warrant such decisiveness on issues freighted with history and with ambiguity? Yet since neither institution has lent its authority, one can only attribute so magisterial a tone to the author’s precocious clarity.

Yet the day is saved — redeemed even — when the subsequent actors, by their competent and experienced performance, dismantle and reconstitute the very stage the introduction labors so to set. And while their manner so effectively

belies its knowing tone, their treatment also confirms what useful and perceptive observations the editor does make.

So the prospective reader is at once invited and warned: invited to a veritable feast, yet warned not to be put off by the elaborate bill of fare. For the food is prepared even more artfully, if less ostentatiously, than described; and the results are even more nourishing as well as a good deal more subtle to the taste. And this little drama, built into the volume as (perhaps) an added attraction, displays all too forcibly the pressing need for some institution to play a binding role among Christian intellectual endeavors in this land. For there can now be no doubt that the talent exists — though it is manifestly a thin line; what is lacking is a unifying force with inherent (not coercive) authority. Yet do not these very essays suggest that the churches in Jerusalem have never experienced such a binding force? And dare we hope that understanding our history can help us overcome it? Put another way, what will follow this conference, published as the first volume in *Studia Oecumenica Hierosolymitana*? Not another conference; I have that on authority! A few specialized monographs, perhaps? Or dare we dream of the theological communities in Jerusalem being empowered to act on the challenges presented by Pierre Lenhardt and by Khalil Samir, respectively, to focus our efforts and energies on enriching our biblical hermeneutics with rabbinic interpretation, and our interfaith perspectives with the witness of an Arabic Christian literature? And what is even more wild a dream: were we able to do that, might not the two tracks of study one day converge? Reading this volume encourages one to believe that they could — yet another sign of the prophetic power of honest theological analysis.

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