Reader’s Response

More on the “Anti-Zionism=Anti-Semitism” Debate

Joseph L. Ryan

"Israel did not 'steal' the land from the Palestinians as Arab propaganda has frequently claimed..." writes Father John T. Pawlikowski in his "Anti-Zionism=Anti-Semitism: Fact or Fable?" (Worldview, January/February). Let me examine this statement right off, since, I believe, it is fundamentally involved in Father Pawlikowski's case.

To understand the issue clearly, one must first consider, not the state of Israel today or even at its coming into existence in 1948, but the Zionist Movement from the turn of the century. It was a political movement by European Jews aimed precisely at establishing a Jewish state—a state that would be essentially and predominantly Jewish—in Palestine, and in a Palestine where, at that time (at the turn of the century), the population and land ownership were nearly 100 per cent Arab and were, moreover, as the Zionist Movement became known, overwhelmingly opposed to it.

Hence I say: If the Zionist Movement at that time did not constitute a deliberate, basic, and massive violation of the rights of the Arabs in Palestine, especially their right of self-determination, I don't know what would. If the Zionist Movement at that time did not constitute a determination to "steal" the land from the Arabs, I don't know what the word "steal" means.

If the argument of equal rights is adduced, namely, that Jews had a right to a state too, one must ask: By what argument can one rationally justify European Jews setting up a state that intrinsically aims to force the Arab natives to leave or, in remaining, to become inferior? If one argues that European Jews had some right, some tie, to the land, the right of Palestinian Arabs was vastly stronger. The two sets of rights were by no means equal. If one argues that the pressure of anti-Semitism in Europe forced Jews into the Zionist Movement, one argues that it forced them to violate the rights of the Palestinians.

In the age of colonialism, that essential violation of Palestinian rights intrinsic to the Zionist Movement could be ignored practically, but it cannot be defended intellectually, especially today. Of course, even shortly after the Zionist Movement was launched, this violation could not have been defended intellectually. By one of the bitter ironies of history, at the end of World War I the West was extolling the principle of the self-determination of peoples—while in practice, by blessing the Zionist Movement, it was hypocritically denying that principle to the Palestinians.

And Zionist leaders, at least some of them, knew very well what the implications of the Zionist Movement were for the Arabs in Palestine. Not all Zionists, of course, desired to "steal" the land from the Arabs, but even these Zionists supported a movement in which the denial of Palestinian rights was, in fact, implicitly contained as the Movement developed historically. Even today the necessity of an early confrontation between the Arabs in Palestine and the Zionist Movement, as it began to develop, is explicitly recognized, I am told, in a quasi-authoritative source: the introduction to the Book of the Haganah, a special edition of which was used for the Israeli Defense Forces (see Voice of Zionism, No. 1).

I have stressed that we should consider the Zionist Movement first at the turn of the century—rather than after the Holocaust (when the plight of European Jewry became a powerful emotional justification for the West's acceptance of the Zionist Movement) or 1947, as Britain was about to withdraw from Palestine (when the number of Jews in Palestine had increased significantly and some practical decision had to be made)—because the essential violation of Palestinian rights was clearer at the turn of the century than at any later date. But the basic concept of the Zionist Movement—of an essentially Jewish state to the neglect of Palestinian rights—that thrives within Israel today, both in the government and public Jewish attitudes. Such attitudes are behind the settlement in the occupied territories, and in the plans for further Judaization of Galilee, which provoked the Israeli Arab general strike of March 30, 1976. To say nothing of the Law of Return, the Jewish National Fund restrictions against non-Jews, etc.

Further, unless that basic injustice, inherent in Zionism, is recognized, Israeli Jews (and anyone else) do not begin to face the fundamental Arab problem regarding Israel or the Arab view of Israel, nor attempt to undo past injustices, inasmuch as they can be redressed today.

In the light of this fundamental view, what of Father Pawlikowski's points?

Regarding his first division, classical anti-Semitism, one cannot understand Arab attitudes to Jews and Zionism without understanding, as I have just explained, Arab attitudes toward the injustice inherent in Zionism. Father Pawlikowski stresses much the Arab admiration for Hitler and its "influence today." This stress, I believe, is a grave distortion; I am convinced of that, not

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only because of Father Pawlikowski's false argumentation, as I have indicated above, but also because of my own long experience in the Arab world. In this connection, Americans might ask if U.S. Presidents and Churchill, who consorted with Stalin in World War II for the sake of Allied interests against a common enemy, thereby shared in Stalin's disregard for human rights.

Further, if the enemy for the Arab is the Jewish state—and the state which proclaims itself precisely as Jewish, in which Arabs are a subject minority—then all Arab enmity is necessarily involved with Jews and with the Jewish state; when Arabs talk about Israel and Israelis, they are talking about an enemy Jewish state and Jewish enemies. In spite of this it has always astonished me how Arabs of various backgrounds and Palestinians too would very frequently make an explicit distinction, as I have observed them to make for decades, between Zionism and Judaism, and Zionists and Jews.

Regarding Father Pawlikowski's second kind of anti-Semitism, and supposing he quotes chapter and verse correctly, we must ask: What relevance do his quotations actually have? I am not denying that Muslims believe that Islam is superior—nor that Christians consider Christianity superior, nor Jews Judaism. Nor that this superiority forms conscious and unconscious attitudes and has political consequences for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. But what is the precise relevance of this superiority in the case at hand, and how does one prove it? Not merely assert it after giving some quotes or references covering centuries and 100 million Arabs and 500 million Muslims today. What are Father Pawlikowski's sources? "Scholars" with views of Arabs like General Harkabi? I doubt very much if Father Pawlikowski would write about Jewish anti-Arab or anti-Jewish attitudes in the same way he has treated Arabs and Muslims here. I would not want someone to write on the Franciscans, for example, the way Father Pawlikowski writes about Muslims. To reproach the twelfth-century Abo'hades for lacking a twentieth-century idea of equality and respect is a bit much. Father Pawlikowski's self-confidence ("there is no doubt in my mind...") in analyzing Muslim motivation is extraordinary. His article, in this respect, recalls Columbia Professor Edward Said's strictures on Western Orientalists' views of Arabs (cf. Arabs in America, Medina University Press, 1975, pp. 83-112).

In my own experience the independence of the State of Israel is a problem mainly for Arabs and Palestinians, not, as Father Pawlikowski states, because it is a reminder of the equality of Jews, but of the injustice of Zionism to Palestinians. I find it quaint that Westerners, face to face with non-Western resistance to injustice, search to explain that resistance by special, "mysterious" causes, which may be involved, rather than by the same sense of human dignity which Westerners glory in, which certainly is involved.

Furthermore, Father Pawlikowski in his extended treatment hardly refers to the Palestinian proposal for a secular democratic state inasmuch as it is Palestinian, nor does he discuss Palestinian attitudes toward Jews—an extraordinary intellectual omission for a serious paper, since the Palestinians, not the other Arabs, are the ones central to the problem; their proposal was made precisely to face the heart of the issue Father Pawlikowski raises.

Finally, regarding Father Pawlikowski's "rule of thumb," he, like Forster and Epstein in The New Anti-Semitism, is making a new definition or quasi-definition of anti-Semitism, making it something else. What is "the survival of the state"? What state? The state essentially Jewish, with Arabs as second-class citizens? With what borders? A state occupying Arab lands? What is "the right of Israel to exist"? This latter phrase is one of the greatest unexamined sacred cows today. Undefined, it can mean anything any fanatic wishes it to mean.

Let me comment on two pertinent questions:

1. Did Israel have a right to come into existence? That is, was the Zionist Movement, from the moment of its launching, a movement essentially and extensively unjust? If it was, then in that sense and to that extent Israel had no right to come into existence. Unless we face this fundamental question we cannot seriously go on to others, which are numerous (the rights of Jews in Palestine on May 14, 1948, and May 16, 1948, and today).

Precisely because of this historic injustice inherent in Israel's coming into existence, Israel must today and in the future redress as far as is possible the injustices its coming into existence have done to Palestinians. If it does not, in that sense and to that extent not only is the State not defensible, but the security of Israeli Jews is gravely threatened. (Hence one might turn Father Pawlikowski's rule of thumb around and argue that a person would be guilty of anti-Semitism who makes a proposal—such as not recognizing the essential injustice of the Zionist movement—which is conducive to the serious harm of Israeli Jews.)

2. Suppose in x years the Arab population within Israel (perhaps with a significant number of Israeli anti-Zionist Jews) becomes more than 50 per cent of the population, and suppose that in this much-lauded "democratic" state this majority decides to abolish the Jewish character of the state (by changing the Law of Return, the discriminatory Jewish National Fund restrictions against Arabs, and by returning Arab land expropriated since 1948, etc.). Is this anti-Semitism? It would be by some definitions of this "new anti-Semitism."

Anti-Semitism is, no doubt, a serious problem in the United States. But Father Pawlikowski's rule of thumb, as stated, can easily lead to slander (calling people anti-Semites for simply holding different political views), to blackmail (blocking off rational discourse), to totalitarianism (who "gets the distinct impression" Father Pawlikowski talks about?), to the neglect of real anti-Semitism, etc.

A last, small point: I found very revealing Father Pawlikowski's admission that the Law of Return is not understandable "purely from a rational or legal perspective."
John T. Pawlikowski Responds

As one who has been associated with the pro-Israeli side in the Middle East conflict, it is no surprise to be asked to respond to a critical comment by Father Joseph Ryan. He speaks loudly and clearly in defense of Palestinian rights. My only regret is that he has coupled his legitimate support of the Palestinian cause with a highly selective reading of modern history in the Middle East, one that ultimately results in a serious distortion of the Israeli case for justice.

Let me respond to some of Father Ryan's major criticisms of my article to illustrate the selectivity of his approach. His first argument is that if one looks at the origins of the Zionist movement, an essential movement of European Jews, the injustice against Arabs, the "stealing" of Palestine by the Zionists, will become crystal clear. Not true, Father Ryan. While the impetus, money, and organization for the Zionist movement came from Europe and North America, the establishment of the Jewish state was not intended merely as a refuge for European Jews. The European Zionists were equally concerned about both the native Jewish population residing in Palestine in an unbroken sequence from biblical times and the nearly half million Jews in Arab countries, most of whom were too poor and oppressed to organize any Zionist movement of their own. While Israel has not done enough as yet to incorporate its non-European Jews into the mainstream of its national life, a situation I and Jews have publicly criticized, this does not erase the fact that Israel was always conceived of, and in fact has served, as a haven for Arabic Jews.

Secondly, Jews purchased most of the land from Arab owners rather than seizing it by force or conquest. While the purchase process is not one that might be considered ideal by contemporary standards, we can only judge it against the norms operative at that time. Jews had to deal with the people who had title to the land at that period. Granted there has been some expropriation of land by Israel since 1948, which I have to regard as highly questionable from the moral perspective. But if one wants to concentrate on the pre-1948 period, as Father Ryan urges us to do, then we have to be honest and say that the land acquired by Jews for the State was already in Jewish hands prior to the start of the Zionist movement or was bought from the owners of the period. Likewise it should be noted that much of this territory was the homeland of nobody, being highly infested with malaria and frequently desert. So there was no widespread eviction of Arabs from their homes prior to '48 as a result of Zionist land purchases.

A final point with regard to the pre-1948 situation. It is important to recognize that while it is true that many Jews came after World War I to the area of Palestine that eventually became Israel, a similar story exists with respect to the Arab population. This fact seldom emerges. When the British authorities carried out the first census in 1922, there were only 184,000 Arabs in the area. By 1948 there were more than a million Arabs. Something like 80 per cent of them were recent immigrants to the country from neighboring Arab states. The reason for the Arab influx was the greater economic development of Palestine resulting from the Jewish immigration. More Arabs came in than Jews, because the British government, despite its League of Nations mandate, never stood in the way of Arab immigration in the same way it did in the case of Jewish immigration. Far from displacing Arabs, Jewish immigration had the effect of attracting more Arabs into the territory of Palestine.

In the second part of his response Father Ryan accuses me of exaggerating the anti-Jewish components of Islam as a factor in the present Middle East conflict. Let me repeat what I said quite clearly in my article. This element is only one part of the total picture, but one that cannot be completely ignored if a peace proposal is to emerge that is rationally and psychologically acceptable to the Israelis. I too have been in Arab circles (both intellectual and popular), have heard Arab broadcasts, and read Arab literature. Let me assure Father Ryan that the traditional anti-Jewish elements of Islam coupled with anti-Semitic outlooks inherited from the West are still significantly alive and kicking in great parts of the Arab world.

If you truly desire peace in the Middle East, Father Ryan, it is up to you to speak out candidly and forcefully against these anti-Semitic manifestations, just as some of us on the Israeli side have leveled criticisms against Israeli policies. These anti-Jewish components in no way take away the legitimate claims of the Palestinians, which I have always maintained (contrary to Golda Meir and many of my colleagues) are at the core of the Middle East dispute and without whose resolution there can be no permanent peace. But we cannot pretend, on the other hand, that they exercise no formative influence on the Arab stance vis-à-vis Israel.

In the latter part of his letter Father Ryan criticizes the exclusively Jewish character of the present State of Israel. I have consistently said that major changes are necessary in the internal structures of Israeli society. I feel this would come about rather rapidly under conditions of peace because many, many Israelis are aware of the inequalities that exist. But let us be honest. The Jewish character of present-day Israel, despite its glaring imperfections, allows for far more freedom and cultural diversity than does the Islamic character of most of the other states in the region. No nation has yet solved with full success the problem of minority rights. This is no excuse for Israel to stop trying. But let our criticisms be directed against all, not just Israel.

A final point. Father Ryan's handling of my "rule of thumb" principle and his ultimate reversal of it strike me as a bit humorous. It is hardly what Forster and Epstein suggest in The New Anti-Semitism, a book I feel is not terribly helpful in the current debate about anti-Semitism.

My one joy in reading Father Ryan's letter was the fact that he seems finally to accept the idea that in any final settlement of the Middle East conflict Israel must continue to exist as a state. This has not always been clear in his writings. But it is still incumbent upon Father Ryan to amplify what the outlines of a peace settlement would look like from his perspective. Father Ryan will not make a genuine contribution to the Middle East debate until he couples his criticism of Israel and his defense of Palestinian rights with some constructive, concrete peace proposal that goes beyond the presently empty formula of a "secular, democratic state."