

HAD I BEEN BORN ELSEWHERE WOULD I LOOK AT THE WORLD DIFFERENTLY?

I was born between the end of WW2 and the Suez crisis of 1956. I was born. I didn't ask to come into the world. I was born on the Ards peninsula in the village of Portavogie. I didn't ask to be born there. I was born into the British empire and again I didn't ask to be but I was born into an imperial world, a colonial world and most of the population in Northern Ireland were proud of that imperial, colonial Britishness. Of course, at two days old I had plenty of time to think about these things, all day long. I couldn't ask my mother about it. She wouldn't have understood me! My brother was born after the Suez crisis when the empire and colonial Britain was crumbling and collapsing. I don't know if he sees the world a bit differently from me, but the ethos of our village and the education system was still somewhat imperialistic. Neither of us was taught Irish and I certainly wasn't taught any Irish history, and I don't think he did much Irish history either. What Irish history we did know came via the 11 July bonfires and the 12 July marches. And so you grow up with a worldview and a particular lens through which you see the world. Only about eight miles away from Portavogie was Portaferry. In Portavogie we were all Protestant and imperial. In Portaferry most of the people were Catholic and Nationalist and didn't much like the empire. I was nineteen before I met close up a guy from Portaferry as students at a Merchant Navy Radio Operator training college in Belfast. We got on well. We were from the Ards peninsula, the bottom eight miles of the peninsula. But we saw the world differently. I still feel sadness when I remember, as I do, that only a few years later Liam died from a terrible disease, his life and experience of the world cut very short too soon. I lived on with my worldview challenged. I was twenty before I became aware that it was being challenged. Had I been born elsewhere would I see the world differently?

In some parts of Belfast and Northern Ireland you will see Israeli flags and in other parts you will see Palestinian flags. Most don't fly the flags but there is something of an emotional identification along those divided lines. To generalise, and it is a generalisation, most Protestant/Unionists lean towards Israel and most Catholic/Nationalist/Republicans lean towards Palestinians. A generalisation but like most generalisations, a grain of truth in it. Over thirty years ago we didn't fly flags but there was a similar community split over South Africa, one side of the community with sympathy towards the minority White Apartheid government and the others with the majority Black/Coloured community and anti-apartheid. Churches back then had much more public profile than now but there were few resolutions re apartheid from Protestant churches, and none at all from the largest Protestant church. The anti-apartheid protests and boycotts were happening in Dublin and not Belfast. Why do we divide in this way? And let me stress again, this is a generalisation with a grain of truth. Is there something about our history, and that includes where we were born and what we were born into, that has shaped our worldview and how we see and read conflicts and divisions elsewhere?

In 1992 Donald Akenson, Canadian -American who taught for a while at Queens, wrote a book, *God's People's: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster*. Akenson explored cultural identities in each of these countries based on Covenant, with its ideas of chosen people, based on a literal reading of an idea from the Hebrew Bible or what Christians call the Old Testament. It was a politicised theology devoted to an anthropomorphised, warlike God, belief in the threat of an external enemy, always an external enemy, and the legacy of Exodus and Conquest Biblical narratives. Covenant, chosen people, promised land, Exodus, or God's deliverance and Conquest of land, the ever-present external enemy, war-like God and a sense of specialness, exceptionalism, all of which White South Africans, Israelis and Ulster Protestants had in common.

There were Black/Coloured South Africans, Palestinians and Catholic/Nationalists who experienced and saw the world differently. Was this why there was White South African support for Northern Ireland Unionists over thirty years ago and why Israeli Zionists invoked and highlighted the partition and experience of Northern Ireland for their experience of establishing a state and dealing with Palestinians?

South Africa, Israel and Northern Ireland/Ireland are all examples of settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is motivated by 'the logic of elimination.' Settlers develop the necessary moral justifications and practical means to remove the natives. Sometimes that means actual genocide, at other times ethnic cleansing or an oppressive regime that denied the natives or indigenous peoples any rights.¹ (Patrick Wolfe, in Ilan Pappé, 2017, p42). Covenant was the religious and moral justification for settler colonialism and oppressive domination in South Africa, Israel and Ulster. Settlers in South Africa came from the Netherlands then Britain, European Jews to Israel and largely Scots Protestants to Ulster. The taking of land was the all-important issue which meant displacing people from land. Those displaced and who lost their land were controlled by laws that kept them within boundaries, denied them rights, deprived them of their land and reduced them to poverty. White South Africa passed laws to control the Blacks/Coloured. The Israelis passed laws and created Jewish settlements to control and nullify the Palestinians. The Tudors invaded Ireland and Ireland became a colony in the sixteenth century and for the next three centuries there were Penal Laws that oppressed and controlled the Irish Catholic community, reducing many to poverty and denying rights and any say in their own society, so as to not only 'prevent the further growth of Popery' but to maintain a minority Protestant Ascendancy.

By the eighteenth century 84% of Irish land was owned by the Protestant Ascendancy. Until Catholic Emancipation in 1829 when Penal Laws were finally abolished, from the seventeenth century the Penal Laws had also applied to Presbyterians.

In the early seventeenth century King James I introduced the Plantation of Ulster, which was a legislated political act to control the troublesome north-east of Ireland and eliminate Catholicism and introduce the true faith of Protestantism. To control the troublesome north-east meant deliberately changing the demographics and settling mainly Scottish Protestants as settlers. Between 1610-1640 some 40,000 settlers were planted in Ulster. The history of this place is a history of settler colonialism, like South Africa and Israel. The problem reached new levels in 1921 when Ireland was partitioned and the Province of Ulster was partitioned, as a six county entity was created to ensure that there would always be a Protestant majority. Northern Ireland was the product of settler colonialism and from its foundation in 1921 was a gerrymandered state. We don't need to go into the reality that 104 years later the demographics have changed, gone into reverse, which creates an existential crisis for the descendants of settlers.

This is the history into which I was born. I didn't ask to be born into it, I had no say in that. But I was born into a colonial history with Scottish and Cornish ancestry, a history of colonial Ireland, the Ireland of empire. I don't know where my Portaferry friend Liam originated, but he too was born into a colonial history only his experience was from the other side of the historical consciousness and experience. Back then we each saw the world differently.

South Africa, Israel and Ulster, as Akenson called it, really did have a heap in common, religiously and politically. A history of settler colonialism and a history of displaced losers, a domination system and the oppressed. Because of who we are and where we have come from, is that what colours the way we see Palestine-Israel? Are some of us, along our sectarian lines, Zionists at heart, even Christian Zionists, which has its roots in Protestant Ireland. Or liberationist Palestinians? Is our historical consciousness shaping our alignments with Palestine-Israel or Israel-Palestine. Even the order in which we put that may be saying something!

Akenson saw a large common thread between South Africa, Israel and Ulster around the idea of Covenant, a core Biblical idea though more politicised in each location. Maybe what White South Africans, Israeli, Jewish Zionists and Ulster Protestants had failed to see and those on the other side of the settler colonialism didn't realize, or maybe they did! : Covenant was a political and social vision. It always was political; a vision of community firmly rooted in social justice for all. If only? History might have been, could have been different.

REFERENCE

1. Pappe, I. (2017), *Ten Myths about Israel*, (London: Verso), p42.

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