

Semitism - The Whence and Whither. 'How dear are your Counsels' by Kenneth Cragg. Sussex Academic Press 2005.

Kenneth Cragg is an Anglican academic who was Bishop of Jerusalem between 1970 and 1985. The fifteen year period of his bishopric was one of the most significant in the history of the State of Israel, encompassing as it did the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the election for the first time of the Likud party to government, the invasion of Lebanon and the withdrawal of troops from that country. Israel and the wider Middle East are still experiencing the after shocks of that turbulent decade and a half.

Clearly that experience helped to shape Bishop Cragg's thoughts which find expression in his excessively clumsily titled new book. Through the course of ten chapters Cragg explores Semitism, as he understands it, and its evil antithesis, anti-Semitism. He considers the way in which Jewish self-perception, as well as Jewish perception of non-Jews, has shaped the way that Christians have perceived Jews themselves. He considers the way in which Jewish-Christian history inexorably led to both Zionism and the Shoah, and ponders the effect of Zionism and the State of Israel on Jewish integration in the world at large, as well as in the Middle East in particular.

Undoubtedly Semitism represents a sincere effort by Kenneth Cragg to achieve a reconciliation between his cherished Christian beliefs and the existence of a powerful Jewish state in the Holy Land, as well as a genuine attempt to understand how Jews, Judaism and Jewish history have survived in spite of their rejection of Christ. For this effort he is to be saluted.

It is then sad to report that the effort is undermined by an excessive use of convoluted and frequently opaque language which leaves the reader wondering precisely what the author means and why on earth he couldn't have expressed it in straightforward English.

The title alone, in three parts, sets a tone for the content which a judicious editor should have urged the author to avoid at all costs, and it seems extraordinary to this reviewer that such advice was either not proffered or ignored.

Cragg could also have avoided some elementary mistakes in his text, not least the repeated rendering of the Hebrew word and rabbinic divine name HaMakom as Ha Maqam (sic) and the consistent mis-spelling of the surname of Great Britain's well-known Orthodox Chief Rabbi as Sachs (sic).

In conclusion it is hard to decide precisely what Semitism is about: the Arab-Israeli conflict? Jewish-Christian relations? Christian anti-Semitism? The ideology of Judaism? Zionism? Whatever the answer the truth is that there are much better - and more readily comprehensible - books on all these subjects than this.

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