

What's it all about? Questions of identity.

In the last number I initiated this column with a critique of a review which seemed to me to typify the kind of problems which supporters of the Palestinians face. In the next few numbers I want to focus more specifically on the question of identity which is at the heart of the conflict - Jewish identity, but also Palestinian and Arab identity.

Considering the centrality of this issue it is surprising how little attention is paid to it. Israel, it is claimed, is the essential national expression of Jewish identity, or some such phrase. But what is Jewish identity? Is it an ideal or a reality? Does it make sense to identify as a Jew but not practise the Jewish religion? If it does, then what is the defining characteristic of Jewish identity? Is it sufficient that your ancestors practised the Jewish religion? And if so, how many ancestors; is half enough? Or is Jewish identity dependent on 'semitic' racial characteristics or on cultural homogeneity?

Akiva Orr, in his book *Israel: Politics, Myths and Identity Crises*, faces this matter squarely: 'Any person insisting on being "Jewish" yet not practising the religion has problems of defining his/her Jewishness. Private, personal, definitions abound, and they may satisfy the particular person, but none is generally accepted as binding for all.' In Orr's view it was the lack of clarity among secular Jews about their identity which was the driving force behind Zionism. In other words Jewish identity was for them an ideal, to be realised through the establishment of a Jewish state, rather than a pre-existing reality. The attempt to define Jewish identity in racial or cultural terms simply falls down in face of the evidence. The concept of the chosen race, and the relative physical distinctiveness of some European Jews (perhaps deriving from Turkish ancestry) makes the idea of a racially or culturally based Jewish identity more seductive than, say, that of a Christian or Muslim identity. It is, however, in essence equally untenable.

But could it be that all identification has more to do with idealism than reality? I believe it is so. We identify in order to feel secure, and if the identity doesn't quite make sense, we invent myths to overcome the objections. The extraordinary power of such distortions is illustrated by the title of Ilan Pappé's otherwise excellent book, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. For the dichotomy between Israeli and Arab makes no sense when you consider that even in the time Pappé was writing about (around 1948) a very substantial part of the Israeli population was Arab, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish. Today it can be argued that Arabs form the majority.

But then that raises the question of what we mean by 'Arab', to which I will return next time.