

BOOK REVIEW: A messy present, a peaceful past

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It is a rare pleasure to encounter two books so very different in tone and style, but united in their unusually positive attitude about some of the most vexing issues in today's world.

The beautifully written, passionately argued book "Peace Be Upon You" sets out to offer a much-needed corrective on the history of relations between the adherents of three monotheistic religions, those fraternal descendants of Abraham: Jews, Christians and Muslims. In her book, "To Be an Arab in Israel," Laurence Louer examines what it means to be an Arab citizen of the Jewish state. And both see signs of hope for the future.

Too much attention is given, author Zachary Karabell argues in "Peace Be Upon You," to flash points of violence and oppression that have occurred between the three religious groups. They are, he shows repeatedly, the exception not the rule.

"Each of the faiths," he writes, "teaches its followers to greet friends and strangers with the warm open arms of acceptance. Peace comes first and last. That is not the common view. Scholars have rarely lost sight of the legacy of coexistence.... Yet somehow that awareness has remained locked away in university libraries or confined to college courses. As a result ... all that most people hear is the echo of the Arab conquests that followed Muhammad's death. And in the Muslim world, the memory of imperialism and Western aggression obscures memories of cooperation."

Part of the problem, Karabell concedes, is that brief occurrences of massacres, desecrations and destruction make for more vivid stories. He does not gloss over the horrific acts of violence perpetrated by Western European pilgrim warriors on Jews, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims during the Crusades, but he shows that between those events there were long periods of peace and amity among the different religious groups.

He notes, too, that acts of desecration of places of religious worship, which in our time would generate riots and insurrection, often passed without violent reaction. Across the ages, whether pointing out that on the whole Jews fared much better under Muslim rule than they did under Christian, or remarking on the role Coptic Christians still play in contemporary and predominantly Muslim Egypt, Karabell displays an admirable ability to accentuate the positive.

Occasionally, in his zeal to put the best possible spin on things, Karabell can be a touch naive, perhaps too willing to accept pronouncements and edicts at face value. He quotes a Muslim leader from the Middle Ages who said that "upon whoever speaks the truth, we bestow praise; for whoever does not know the truth, we provide instruction." Fine words, but they seem eerily reminiscent of the language of reeducation in communist societies; think of the cultural revolution in communist China. But Karabell's heart is so obviously in the right place and his writing so fluid and lively that reading him is a pleasure.

As admirable and intelligent as Louer's book is, the distinguished French scholar's writing is often ponderous and lacks the grace notes that characterize Karabell's pages. But she also shines a light on a topic that almost always is seen in negative terms. She is concerned not with the Palestinian Arabs of the troubled West Bank and Gaza but with those Arabs living in Israel. She notes their limited participation in

some aspects of Israeli society, notably their exemption from mandatory military service, that make them de facto second-class citizens. But they are a vigorous, visible presence in the Knesset, and the major Israeli political parties without exception have wooed them.

All in all, Louer presents a picture of a functioning Jewish- Arab dynamic that doesn't get the attention that suicide bombings and other conflicts do.

At the end of his passionate, earnest book, Karabell, writing about present-day Dubai, United Arab Emirates, sees a beacon of sensible cooperation between people of all three faiths engaged in the real food and drink of today's global economy: commerce. Even if you find materialism ignoble, you are likely to share this book's verdict that it is vastly preferable to fanaticism. The rulers of Dubai "are not trying to restore a golden age. They are not driven by a sense of grievance. They are simply working with the world around them.... And so are the millions who go about their daily lives seeking only the betterment of themselves and their families, uninterested in dogma, theology, and hatred. That has been true for the entire history of Muslims, Christians, and Jews, even though that part of the story has been neglected, even though discord makes for better drama and more passion.... Peace is woven into our collective past; it is there to be seen in our messy present; and it will be there, if we want it to, in our shared future."

In her drier, more academic manner, Louer ends on an equally hopeful note: Even the most radical elements within the Arab political spectrum in Israel seek not so much to construct an alternative to the system as to exist within it. "Culturally it is an expression of the growing acculturation of the Arabs to Israeli society."

Louer does not underestimate the challenges facing this group's evolving relationship with its majority Jewish fellow citizens nor fears of the potentially destabilizing demographic consequences of Israeli Arabs' disproportionate population growth. But it is impressive and heartening that despite this, she is able to take such a positive attitude. Louer and Karabell have written beacons of hope for an all too often gloomy world.

Martin Rubin is a critic and the author of "Sarah Gertrude Millin: A South African Life."

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Peace Be Upon You
The Story of Muslim, Christian,
and Jewish Coexistence
Zachary Karabell
Alfred A. Knopf: 344 pp., \$26.95

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To Be an Arab in Israel
Laurence Louer
Columbia University Press
Credit: Special to The Times

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