End of innocence

by Donald E. Wagner in the May 20, 1998 issue

By Marc Ellis, Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in Our Time. *(Fortress, 224 pp.)*

Richard Rubenstein has said of Marc Ellis: He is “representative of neither the Jewish nor the Christian mainstream. Nevertheless, he is one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of his generation.” Given such high praise by an eminent scholar, it seems a little surprising that Ellis has been almost ignored by the mainstream secular and academic press and most religious journals.

Ellis has taught at Maryknoll School of Theology and Florida State University, and is currently a fellow and visiting scholar at Harvard University. However, it is Ellis’s prolific writing and his frequent lectures at universities and conferences on the Middle East for over a decade that have gained him enormous respect, albeit within a still limited circle of intellectuals and organizations working on Middle East issues. When the Palestinian intifada was in full swing in early 1988, he was one of the first Jews to articulate from a theological and ethical perspective the need for Israelis to connect their experience in the Holocaust to the injustices they were wreaking on the Palestinian population. The more Ellis articulated the case for Palestinian rights and statehood as the key to Israel’s security, the more his voice was marginalized by the intellectual mainstream in Israel and the U.S.

He also boldly, some would say rashly, challenged Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian ecumenists to end what he calls “the ecumenical deal”--what Ellis sees as the unstated agreement among partners in the Jewish-Christian dialogue whereby Jews will enter into conversation with Christians over issues of anti-Semitism on the condition that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians is not mentioned. Ellis’s daring has won him few friends in these ecumenical circles.

Unholy Alliance is Ellis’s most important work and forms an excellent entry point into his many other writings. Although the book seems written primarily for a Jewish audience, Christians, Muslims and virtually anyone concerned about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holocaust, ethical theory and peace and justice will find it valuable.

Jewish readers will be simultaneously provoked and perhaps given fresh insights into their own experience in the first chapter, “We Who Come After”--a reference to a remark by Jewish philosopher George Steiner. Ellis probes two recent events that shook Jews around the world: the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin in November 1995 and the February 1994 massacre by a religious Jew of Palestinian Muslims during prayers at the Ibrahami Mosque in Hebron. Ellis examines each episode for its ethical implications for Israel and the Jewish community worldwide. Both atrocities were committed by devout Orthodox Jews but were dismissed as “aberrations by the lunatic fringe.”

Not so, claims Ellis. Both incidents are “logical outgrowths of state policies in Israel, policies which have been legitimated by the Jewish establishment in Europe and the United States.” For Ellis, “Jews are no longer innocent,” and their task is to come to terms with Palestinians not only as equals but as victims of Jewish atrocities in our time. “We who come after,” for Ellis, refers not only to the Holocaust but also to Israel’s domination of Palestine.

The Eichmann trial set the tone for the perceived innocence of the Jewish state and Jews in general, according to Ellis. In discussing what is one of the most famous trials in history, Ellis contrasts the views of two Jewish analysts, philosopher Hannah Arendt and novelist Elie Wiesel, who together define “the trajectory of Jewish interpretation of the Holocaust.”

Arendt, like Viktor Frankl (psychoanalyst and author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*), saw the attack on Jews by the Nazis as an attack on all humanity. But for Wiesel and for the mainstream of Jewish Holocaust theology and philosophy, the Holocaust is a “Jewish experience to be guarded and explained by Jews.” From the latter perspective, Jewish suffering in the Holocaust is “twined” with Jewish empowerment in the establishment of the new state of Israel. And, for Ellis, “in Holocaust theology, Jewish empowerment remains essentially innocent.” It is this sense of innocence, Ellis argues, that has ended with the state of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians.

Much of the volume probes the nuances of both Jewish and Christian philosophers and theologians such as Wiesel, Martin Buber, Irving Greenberg, Richard Rubenstein and Emil Fackenheim on issues of religion and violence. All, with the possible exception of Rubenstein, are reviewed and judged to be limiting the debate and attenuating the ethical demands upon Jews in their capacity as citizens of a powerful state.

Similarly, Ellis finds Christian theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann to be trapped in Christian guilt, unable to take their readers and communities toward the urgently needed implications of “ending Auschwitz” and all holocausts. Ellis sees more possibilities for overcoming the unholy alliance of religion and violence in liberation and feminist theologies.

Christians who are engaged in Holocaust studies and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue will be struck by Ellis’s juxtaposing of Pope John Paul II’s address to the Fourth General Conference of Latin American Bishops (1992) with the first Vatican ceremony to officially remember the victims of the Holocaust and the subsequent Vatican agreement with Israel on the Holy Land. Ellis notes that the pope spoke eloquently about the contributions of Christian missions to Latin America but failed to confess the church’s atrocities and complicity with colonial power in the conquest of the Americas. However, that confession was made with reference to the Holocaust.

Ellis might have extended the comparison at this point, citing the compromise the Vatican made in its agreement with the state of Israel on December 30, 1994. In exchange for a nebulous jurisdiction over a few holy sites in Palestine, the church by default granted recognition of Israel’s political sovereignty over Israel’s expanded boundary of Jerusalem, which includes much of the West Bank. This agreement was concluded without prior consultation with the Palestinian Catholic community in the Holy Land.

Ellis is a remarkably lucid writer and an expansive thinker, able to interpret complex political, ethical, theological and philosophical concepts in writing that is both understandable and exceedingly challenging. His ability to combine human-interest stories, poetry and an informed cross-cultural and gender sensitivity enrich the book. For example, to illustrate the possibility of Jews reaching beyond Jewish suffering to embrace the suffering of others, Ellis shares the powerful story of the French Jewish historian Marc Bloch, who returned from freedom to fight with the French underground. Bloch was captured by the Nazis and was on his way to be executed by a firing squad when he noticed a young French boy, also on his way to be shot, crying hysterically. Bloch asked the Nazis if he could comfort the boy and be shot together with him. The request was granted. Ellis returns to this and other stories throughout his text.

Although he will make many readers uncomfortable--many if not most Christians and Jews will react defensively to his often blunt analysis--Ellis is an authoritative

interpreter of today’s events and intellectual landscape. His hermeneutic of universal justice and truth is sorely needed in a world moving toward increasing ethnic and religious particularism and the fundamentalisms and parochial ethical defenses that sometimes result. The time is long overdue for his views to be taken seriously and debated openly.