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The Settlers

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Settlers* (2016) directed by Shimon Dotan.

Author Notes

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The Settlers
(2016)
Directed by Shimon Dotan

The Settlers is an amazing and important documentary film for several reasons. First, it covers the history of the Jewish settlers on the West Bank territory from the origin of the State of Israel up until the present. What this historical perspective shows is that the reasons for establishing the settlements have changed over time and those reasons differ from one group to another. The justification of the settlements is a hodgepodge of ideas. There is no single, simple justification for the settlements upon which there is general agreement.

Second, we get to see both the political and religious reasons for creating the settlements. Of special interest here is the complicity of the Israeli government in the establishment of the settlements. Early on, that complicity was simply putting off a decision – not saying “No.” Those who wanted to settle the West Bank for religious reasons took this to mean that they could establish the settlements. And, once some were established, there were then new “facts on the ground” with which the government had to deal. At various moments in the history of the settlements, the government saw them as a mechanism for providing Israel with greater security. Whether the settlements protect Israel or not remains an open question. Since Israeli soldiers occupy much of the West Bank, the Palestinians are not able to amass an army and weapons that might be used to invade Israel. But, it is possible that the Israeli army could accomplish this same goal without the Jewish settlers, settlers that create in their own way difficulties for the State of Israel. And, for a time it seemed that controlling the West Bank reduced the number of attacks by Palestinians on Israelis. But, at the moment there seems to be an increase in attacks on Israelis. There is also the question of whether the way that Palestinians are treated on the West Bank will become a source of more violence. Of course, there is always the economic question. How much does it cost Israel

to “protect” the settlers? What is the impact of that cost on the Israeli economy? How does the economy play a role in a secure Israel?

Third, this seems to me to be an honest and unbiased view of the settlers. The movie does not take sides. It allows settlers and Palestinians to speak for themselves. It would have been very easy for the film to show one side more favorably than the other, but Shimon Dotan seems to have worked very hard to let each side have its own say.

Since the settlers are given a voice in the film, what do we learn from what they say? The most important thing we learn is that many of the settlers are religious fanatics. That is, they believe that the land on which they live has been given to them by God. It is their divine calling to live on the land. It is their destiny. This is why the settlers talk about “liberating” the land, rather than “occupying” it. The belief that the land comes from God is derived from a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but this interpretation is not generally held by the people of Israel. And, having this belief means that there is no room for reason, no room for discussion. That the land belongs to the settlers (to the settlers that hold this belief) is a divine and absolute truth.

For some of the religious fanatics, the land in question runs all the way from the Nile River in the west to the Euphrates River in the east. This means that the land that belongs to the settlers includes the Sinai Peninsula, and at least parts of Jordan and Iraq, and possibly parts of Syria and Lebanon.¹ This means that there can be no two state solution. Israel must expand beyond its present borders, even beyond the borders of the West Bank. The settlers must take over parts of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, at least. So, all of the present political discussions that take place regarding the West Bank are of no significance to the religious fanatics. Those discussions are based on the European idea of nations and national sovereignty. For the religious fanatics, this

idea must be rejected in favor of following divine law. Indeed, neither the laws of the present State of Israel nor International law, nor the Geneva Convention have any significance for the religious fanatics. They are above the laws of “man.”

But there is more. Since the religious fanatics see this as God’s will, there is no time limit on the battle. The fight for the land claimed by the settlers is ongoing. This means that the settlers are willing to sacrifice generations of young people to this ultimate goal. Generations of young settlers may die for the cause – the cause that is given by God and about which there can be no dispute. Dying, and killing others are not only permitted, but embraced because of the sacred cause.² Indeed, violence of all kinds is called for when necessary. (When violence is necessary is determined, of course, by the settlers themselves.) It is enough for the settlers to play the role of spoiler. That is, they do not have to take over more land; they just have to keep the land they have from being taken back. In the end, the land will belong to later generations of religious fanatics; and, in the end the violence, killing, and dying will be vindicated because God’s will has been done and those who participated will receive divine redemption.

If this isn’t enough, the religious fanatics also want the land from the Nile to the Euphrates to be populated only by Jews. If others do live on the land they will have no political rights. There will be no democracy.³ Indeed, if you force everyone who is not in agreement with your views out of the territory, you will have created essentially apartheid. There have been many complaints about using the word “apartheid” in relation to Israel, but it does not seem to be inappropriate at all to use the word in relation to the kind of territory sought by the religious fanatics. It is an interesting question as to whether or not other Jews would be able to live in the territory if they disagreed with the religious fanatics.

To be clear, not all of the settlers are religious fanatics. But, when you listen to the voices of the religious fanatics, you get a picture of the West Bank and more, even a picture of the State of Israel that seems absurd, unreasonable, without compromise, a picture of Israel that goes well beyond governments and laws and nations and international law. It goes beyond anything we are familiar with by way of people living together on the earth.

The religious fanaticism described above is important to understanding at least many of the settlers, and this documentary, by sharing the voice of the settlers, makes clear what the religious fanatics want and are willing to kill and die for. But, what makes the movie so important is that the kind of religious fanaticism that motivates many of the settlers is the same kind of religious fanaticism that is found in other places around the world. Think here of those Muslims who are attempting to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq – maybe in other countries as well. Indeed, their goal may be to turn the world into an Islamic Caliphate. And, what are they willing to do to reach their goals? Torture, beheadings, rape, killing, destruction of the artifacts and cultures of non-Muslims? How different is this from the goals of the fanatic Jewish settlers? In the movie we even hear from one of the settlers that they had planned to blow up the Dome of the Rock. We are given specific details of the plan, even though it was in the end thwarted. How far are religious fanatics willing to go to impose their interpretation of what is good and holy on everyone else?

But this is not just an issue for Jewish fanatics or Muslim fanatics. In the United States we even find candidates running for President that claim the law of their Christian God overrides the laws of the land; or, that the Supreme Court must be packed with judges who will require everyone to follow the Christian values that these candidates have adopted. It is important to keep in mind here that the fanatics do not represent religions. They only represent their own interpretation of

their religion. And this means that many Jews would suffer under the rule of Jewish fanatics and many Christians would suffer under the rule of Christian fanatics and many Muslims would suffer (or are now suffering) under the rule of Islamic fanatics.

The Settlers is an important film because it helps to explain the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians of the West Bank. But it is even more important because it shows us the divide throughout the world between religious fanatics (and other fanatics) and those who have created a world of reason, tolerance, democracy, freedom, cooperation, non-violence, and so on – what we might call the hallmarks of civilization. The fanatics are concerned with power and control, especially controlling other people who are not in agreement with the fanatics and they will behave in horrible ways to gain that power and control, to dominate others. In other words, the fanatics play by a different set of rules than the civilized world. So the fundamental question becomes: “How do we maintain civilization in the face of the fanatical assault?” One answer to that question is: “Do not become like the fanatics.”

¹ The settlers will not be allowed to expand their territory beyond the West Bank, of course, because the governments of Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon will not provide the settlers with the same protection presently provided by the government of Israel

² As one of the speakers notes, however, “if the land is sacred, then it does not belong to anyone.”

³ The United States has frequently justified its support of Israel on the grounds that it is the only democracy in the Middle East, a justification that would no longer hold if the land of Israel is only for Jews.