Rewriting the History of Jerusalem

October 9, 2016

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The Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/rewriting-the-history-of-jerusalem-1476050331>

This week in Paris, the executive board of Unesco, the United Nations entity charged with looking after matters related to education, science and culture, will vote on a resolution called “Occupied Palestine,” which attempts to redefine the capital of Israel as a supranational city to which Muslims, Christians and Jews have equal claim.

Perhaps not coincidentally, an exhibition currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City makes the same case. For the sake of Jerusalem, both need to be exposed as the attempts at historical revisionism that they are.

Jerusalem has been a busy patch of earth over the course of its history and a magnet for people of many faiths—first Jews, then Christians, then Muslims—becoming over the millennia a location of cultural fascination. The “Jerusalem 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven” exhibition at the Met is a case in point. The show highlights the spectacular objects produced in and around the medieval city that continue to inform its modern aesthetic. It is in many ways a curatorial tour de force and must have entailed all manner of diplomatic wrangling to garner so many loans of such delicate, irreplaceable objects.

But there is an elephant in this tastefully curated gallery. At its heart, this is a show about the identity of Jerusalem, as contentious a topic a thousand years ago as it is today, as is evidenced by the Unesco resolution. The exhibition’s premise, as is encapsulated in its title, is that during the medieval period, all claims to the city were equal and inhabitants were uniformly defined by their participation in this unique community.

This interpretation is implicitly projected onto the modern Jerusalem as photographs of the contemporary city appear on the gallery walls next to the explanatory texts. The visitor is encouraged to conclude that if only adherents of the three major religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—would understand themselves as citizens of Jerusalem, a city transcending national boundaries, this utopia could be recaptured. The organizers are careful to mix up the order of the three religions as listed in written materials to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment.

An uneasy subtext to “Every People Under Heaven” is that during the exhibition’s time frame Jerusalem was completely dominated by Christians and Muslims, successively. These four centuries spanned one of the sparsest Jewish presences in Jerusalem’s history, beginning as they did with the wholesale slaughter of Jews at the hands of the Crusaders in 1099, after which their population dwindled to as few as 200. The Mamluk conquest of 1260 marginally improved conditions, but a significant increase in the Jewish population would have to wait for the 18th century.

This reality is apparent in the show’s makeup, with Jewish objects being largely confined to books and jewelry, and Jewish issues to their longing for the “absent” Temple of Solomon, a longing that is treated as a somewhat quaint anachronism not as an expression of the enduring spiritual connection of Jews to Jerusalem. Jews, we are told, prayed outside the old city walls. Occasionally a Jew appears in the labels for the Christian or Islamic objects, as when one “Stella” reportedly declared that the Dome of the Rock and the al Aqsa mosque are “as radiant and pure as the very heavens,” as if to give the Jewish stamp of legitimization to the structures built on the Temple Mount.

Again, visitors may well ask themselves from this evidence, why can’t we all just get along today as well as we seem to have done in 1000-1400?

And that is where “Every People Under Heaven” does a disservice to its beautiful contents by making them pawns to a contemporary political agenda to delegitimize Israel. Medieval Jerusalem was not a harmonious, multicultural melting pot that inspired great art. It is in fact quite remarkable that great art was created there in the midst of the endemic violence and religious bigotry that characterized the period. What is different now is the composition of modern Jerusalem, which, as the capital of Israel, has a Jewish majority—but it also, somewhat remarkably, has growing numbers of Christians and Muslims. There are challenges inherent in this dynamic, but they are not the same as the circumstances of Jerusalem in the Middle Ages.

Ultimately, “Every People Under Heaven” functions as a highbrow gloss on the movement to define Jerusalem as anything but Jewish, and so to undermine Israel’s sovereignty. A more aggressive approach will be on display at Unesco on Thursday during the vote on the resolution defining Jerusalem as a global city with a universal rather than a national identity.

But both efforts are equally deluded. Imagining the past as we want the present to be is not a practical solution to Jerusalem—or anything else. It would be more productive to try to learn from the painful realities of medieval Jerusalem, not to revise its history. True progress for the city will come only when we confront our own reality, the good as well as the bad, in which Jerusalem is the capital of Israel.