

Sailing Through Troubled Waters: Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land

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Abstract: For many people the names “Arab Christians” and “Palestinian Christians” seem to be oxymoronic. Christianity was, however, born in the Middle East, in a little town called Bethlehem. This article explores the ways in which Palestinian Christians, a minority group in both Palestine and Israel, relate to both Jews and Muslims in Palestine and Israel. Though there is no covert persecution of Palestinian Christians, they face the same trials as other Arabs and Muslims in Palestine, due to the current policies and actions of the Israeli government and to the current “war on terrorism.” In fact, Christians in Palestine become easy targets for both those enraged by and supportive of the US declaration of war. At the same time, they offer the world an example of healthy Christian-Muslim relations. Perhaps too, Palestinian Christians can be the bridge between the Jewish and Muslim communities in the Holy Land.

Key Terms: Palestinian Christians; Arab Christians; Christian-Muslim Relations; Christian-Jewish relations.

I can still remember the first time I met with a tourist group and the expression on their faces when they heard that I am a Palestinian Christian.¹ I discovered that they knew little about the Palestinians, and almost nothing about the Palestinian Christians, let alone of our existence. Their first question to me was “When did you convert to Christianity?” They assumed that missionaries from the “American Mid-West” or somewhere close by were the ones who introduced Christianity to the Holy Land. They were astonished to learn that my family has been Christian for hundreds of years, and that the first missionary to come to our town was Jesus of Nazareth. They were even more bewildered to hear that I am not only Palestin-

ian, but also an Arab Lutheran pastor at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem.

Every year during Advent time, journalists from all over the world flock to “the little town” to write their “Christmas story.” The situation of Christians in Palestine in general, and in Bethlehem in particular, became the focus of media especially during the last few years. What is the situation of the Palestinian Christians? How do they feel? Is their existence threatened? Do they suffer persecution? What about their future? The following is a brief description of the main characteristics of the Palestinian Christian community as I see it. This is not an objective perception but rather a personal insight.

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Christians are Indigenous to the Holy Land

Christianity might seem for many to be a European phenomenon. This is a misconception, since Christianity is a West Asian, “Palestinian” phenomenon. Jesus Christ was born in Palestine, and it is here where he taught, suffered, was crucified, and resurrected. The first Christian communities originated in Palestine. The Palestinian Christians see themselves as the descendants of these first Jewish and non-Jewish Christians, who were able to survive a turbulent history of 2000 years. Christianity was not imported to Palestine. In fact, it is the only “product” that was successfully “exported” from Palestine to the whole world. In a sense, Christianity is a “Palestinian trademark.”

Christians at the Holy Sites

When we examine where Christians live today in the Holy Land, we will find them living around the holy sites. In the West Bank, they are mainly living in and around Bethlehem and Jerusalem, whereas in Israel, they are mainly in Nazareth and Galilee. Christianity disappeared from many cities over the centuries but survived at the holy sites. Christians have always felt responsible for protecting and defending these churches and sites, but they also felt safe there at times of persecution and oppression. The stones of the holy sites need the living stones, but the living stones also need a space and a locality to live in and to celebrate.

A Mosaic of Many Denominations

The existence of various churches is typical of Christianity in Palestine.² From a Euro-centric perspective, the first church schism occurred with the Reformation. But if one considers the history of Eastern Christianity, one knows that pluralism was a main feature

of the Christian community already in the first century, for the simple reason that the gospel of Jesus Christ was contrary to faiths based on laws, always eager to relate to one’s own culture and context. A number of so-called “National Churches” were established already in the first five centuries: The Greek Orthodox Church, The Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, the Armenian Orthodox (Gregorian) Church, the Apostolic Church of the East (Nestorian), and others.³ As a result of the contacts with the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, a variety of so-called “United Churches” were also established in Palestine.⁴ These churches maintained their Eastern rite in tradition and liturgy while at the same time recognizing the primacy of the Pope. During the 19th century, missionary efforts mainly among the oriental churches resulted in the establishment of new churches: the Roman Catholic (Latin)⁵ Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine,⁶ and the Anglican Church. Today there are almost 39 different Christian denominations in Jerusalem. This diversity of denominations is unique. It is simultaneously a blessing and a curse, for therein lies the strength but also the weakness of the Palestinian Christian community, a sign of diverse richness and at the same time a source of conflict and adversities.

A Minority

Christians became through the course of time a minority. Today, the percentage of Christians in Israel and Palestine is around 2% of the total population. There are around 120,000 Palestinian Christians in Israel (as well as around 3000 messianic Jews) and 60,000 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the Diaspora, there are around 300,000 Palestinian Christians who are scattered all over the world. In total, there are more or less 500,000 Palestinian Christians, who comprise 7- 10% of the total Palestinian population.

Due to emigration, the majority of the Palestinian Christians are living in the Diaspora. The socio-economic and political situation continues to be the main

reason for this emigration. The collapse of the “Peace Process” is forcing more and more Christians to emigrate so as to look for a better future for their children. If this trend continues, then the Holy Land will be turned soon into amusement parks of Christian history rather than sites of living Christian witness and service.

An Engaged Minority

Christians in Palestine are a minority, but this is in terms of quantity and not quality. Very seldom have we been a marginalized or a self-centered group. Our modern contribution in the fields of social, diaconal, and educational work should not be underestimated. Out of the 1604 schools in the West Bank and Gaza, 62 are Christian schools, mainly Catholic and Lutheran. They belong to the more advanced schools and are open for Christians and Muslims alike. Out of 24 hospitals, 9 are Christian which serve a Muslim majority. Christians today operate 10 major social institutions, 12 rehabilitation centers, 7 old-age homes, and 12 orphanages. European Churches and church-related institutions fund to a large extent most of the human rights centers in Israel and Palestine. Palestinian Christians were and are still very vocal when it comes to advocating justice, developing a non-violent resistance,⁷ and promoting reconciliation.

Arab Christians

Although the Christians in Palestine are a minority, they are not an ethnic but a religious minority. They are part and parcel of the Arab civilization and culture. In the West, the term “Arab” is equated with “Muslim.” This is certainly a misconception of both Middle Eastern history and Christianity, since Arab Christians are neither a new invention nor a western product. The Evangelist Luke reports in Acts 2:11 that Arabs were present at the first feast of Pentecost. Thus, Arab Christians were among the first Christians. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Apostle Paul

retired into Arabia immediately after his conversion (Gal 1:17). Arab Christianity,⁸ is therefore older than Islam itself. Christians in Palestine were originally Aramaic-speaking Christians (like Jesus himself), who were forced to become “Orthodox” in the post-Constantine Era and Arabised in the course of history, especially after the Muslim conquest of Palestine in 637 AD. It was at the Mar Saba Monastery near Bethlehem, as early as the 9th century, when the first Arabic *Summa Theologica* was developed.⁹ During the 19th century, Arab Christians played an important role in shaking the Arab world out of its deep medieval sleep, promoting the renaissance of the Arabic culture and language, and introducing modern ideas and values to the Arab world.¹⁰

Part and Parcel of the Palestinian People

Christians in Palestine share with their Muslim neighbors the same fears and hopes. The Zionist movement, the politics of the British Mandate, the refugee experience, and the Israeli occupation have affected Muslims and Christians alike. These sufferings make Muslims and Christians share the same hopes and work for common goals. Therefore, throughout modern history Christians and Muslims in Palestine have worked together against the “Muslim” Ottoman rule, against the “Christian” British Mandate, as well as against the “Jewish” Israeli occupation. In contrast to certain Christian ideologies in neighboring Arab countries, which trace themselves back to separate roots that would distinguish them from their Muslim country people (such as the Maronites in Lebanon, who trace their roots back to the Phoenicians, the Copts to the Pharaohs, or the Chaldaens to the Assyrians), Palestinian Christians do not have such separatist movements.

In addition, Christians played a leading role in the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization that was established in 1964. George Habash, former chairperson of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (P.F.L.P.) and Naef Hawatmeh, chairperson of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

(D.F.L.P.) are both Christians. Within the Palestinian Authority itself, Christians hold key positions. The mayors of Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala are Christian, as are the mayors of smaller villages such as Taybeh, Zababdeh, Bir Zeit, Rafiddiyye, and others. President Arafat himself married a Christian. President Arafat also has Christians among his top aids, including Ramzi Khoury (Director of the President's Office), Nabil Abu Rudeineh (Media Advisor and Spokesperson), Jirius Attrash (General Director, Bethlehem office) and Sami Mussalam (General Director, Jericho Office). It is interesting to note here that the last three people mentioned are graduates of the Evangelical Lutheran School in Bethlehem. Christians also hold key governmental posts. There are two Christian cabinet ministers (Mr. Mitri Abu Aita, Minister of Tourism and Antiquity, and Dr. Nabil Qassis, Minister of the Bethlehem 2000 Project), besides the former Minister for Higher Education, Dr. Hanan Ashrawi. The PLO Executive Committee includes Christians such as Dr. Emile Jarjou'i. Out of the 82 seats of the Palestinian National Council (parliament), 6 are by law reserved for Christians.

A Bridge between the Arab World and the Western World

Just as Palestinian Christians are an inseparable part of the Arab Islamic world, they are also an inseparable part of a worldwide Christian Church. They belong to both the Arab world and the universal church. For centuries, belonging to two worlds has constituted a great challenge, which was not always easy to resolve. Sometimes it seemed as though Palestinian Christians were caught in between. They were sometimes misunderstood and even betrayed by both sides. During the Middle Ages they were persecuted by the Crusaders because of their oriental church belonging, as well as by some fanatic Muslim Caliphs. On the other hand, they were able to profit very often from this double belonging. They were able to obtain help from their brothers and sisters in the West, and at the same time, promote understanding for the Arab world. They of-

ten functioned as transcendents of borders and as bridge builders.

A Persecuted Community?

Is the Christian community in the Holy Land persecuted? If persecution means a systematic policy of discrimination because of beliefs, then the answer is definitely "No." Neither in Israel nor in Palestine are Christians persecuted for our faith in Christ. But in both contexts Christians are facing difficult times. In the Occupied Palestinian territories, Christians are suffering like the Muslims under Israeli occupation: we cannot travel and move freely, thousands of us spent months and years in Israeli prisons for our political convictions, some of us were deported and thousands were displaced from our homes and villages.

For the Israelis, the Christians in the Palestinian territories are primarily Palestinians and they are treated as such.¹¹ In Israel, the Palestinian Christians are second-class citizens, since we are viewed primarily as Arabs.¹² As such we are discriminated against. As non-Jews we are prohibited by law from leasing or getting land from the Jewish National Fund; we receive only 2% of the Ministry of Religious Affairs budget despite the fact that Muslims, Christians, and Druze constitute 19% of the population. The Israeli government has recognized only Jewish holy places under the 1967 Protection of Holy Sites law, therefore denying government funding for the preservation of other Christian or Muslim religious sites. The Law of Return guarantees immediate and automatic citizenship to Jewish immigrants of whatever nationality, but excludes native Christians and Muslims who were forced to flee during the 1948 and 1967 wars from returning.

In the Palestinian autonomous areas, Christians enjoy the protection of the Palestinian Authority but at the same time they are concerned because of the lack of democratic structures and laws where the minority accepts the rule of the majority while the majority protects the rights of the minority, and where conflicts are solved by adhering to the one and same law where all are equal. While in Israel the Palestinian

Arab Christians are recognized as a community, the messianic Jews as such are not.¹³ The State of Israel does not recognize Jews who believe in Christ as the Messiah as Jews. They have, so to say, to choose between being a Jew or a Christian; they can not be recognized as a “messianic Jew.” It is important to note here that the reformed and conservative Jewish movements, the two major American Jewish movements, are also not recognized in Israel since the orthodox rabbinate has a monopoly over the decision of who is a Jew and they alone set the criteria and perform all legal Jewish rites (marriage, etc.).

Conversion Forbidden

What both contexts, the Israeli and the Palestinian, have in common is that Christians have the full liberty to practice their religion and to run their educational as well as social and diaconal institutions, but they are not allowed to do mission work among non-Christians, meaning among Jews and Muslims. In both contexts Palestinian Christians have even the freedom to broadcast Sunday services, sermons, and liturgies in private and public radio and TV stations. However, in both contexts Christians face strong resistance and problems if state bodies hear that some Muslims or some Jews have converted or are invited to convert to Christianity. In the Palestinian areas this is because of the Islamic Shari’a, since it considers a convert to be an apostate, interestingly similar to some early Christian traditions in the Byzantine Era. “According to Shari’a Law, applicable throughout the Muslim world, any Muslim who declares changing his religion or declares becoming an unbeliever is committing a major sin punishable by capital punishment. In practice, this has never happened in the Palestinian areas, nor is it likely to happen at all,” was the official response of the Palestinian Ministry of Information to such an incident on December 23, 1997.¹⁴

In August 1997, the Evangelist Morris Cerullo mailed an estimated 1.5 million copies of a Hebrew language booklet calling on Jews to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah.¹⁵ Outraged by his actions, the United Torah Judaism Party in Israel responded by introduc-

ing bill 174c “Prohibition of Enticement To Change Religion By Mail” to the Israeli Knesset: “The distributor of a document by means of the mail, the fax, the electronic mail, or by any other means, that is enticement to change religion, whether directly or indirectly, without obtaining the prior consent of the addressee thereto, is subject to three months imprisonment.”¹⁶ This bill was approved in Preliminary Readings by the Israeli Knesset, but yet rejected by the “Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee” on December 26, 2001. The issue is far from being over since the recommendation of the committee still needs to be reconfirmed by the Knesset.

A Community Sailing Through Troubled Waters

The Palestinian Christian community is a community that is very much affected with what happens in the Middle East and even in many other parts of the world. The symbol of the church as a ship sailing through troubled waters is an apt description of the Palestinian Christian community. The “Clash of Civilizations” presents a challenge for a community which exists between two civilizations. Osama bin Laden’s videos, where he is describing the Christians as infidels, presents a threat to a community which sees itself as part and parcel of an Arab Islamic world. George Bush’s words about the new crusades are not less threatening to a community which suffered under the Middle Age crusaders and which continues to live within a Muslim context that is still traumatized by that terrible event.

It takes great efforts for a small community like the Palestinian Christian community to resist all the different groups who try to pirate this ship and to lead it to their own ends. In this sense, the several debates, reports, and articles published by the Israeli government¹⁷ or the Christian Coalition on the persecution of Christians in Palestine are but attempts to instrumentalize the fate of the Palestinian Christian community to their own political ends: the Israeli government to undermine the PA and to portray it as an anti-Christian government, and the Christian Coa-

lition as part of its strategy to strengthen the “identity” of its followers by focusing on a strong Muslim and anti-Christian enemy. The same is true also about fundamentalist Muslim groups who need a scapegoat for their own failures. It indeed takes considerable skill for a small community such as the Palestinian Christian community to keep developing an open and dynamic identity, having to face all these different conflicting, closed, and static identities. The Palestinian Christian ship needs a lot of talent to sail through all of these troubled waters without losing direction.

Christians in a Context of Uncertainty and Instability

Today, Palestine and Israel are going through a state of uncertainty and political, social, economic, as well as religious instability. All of these changes are affecting the Christians. Some feel afraid, some lose their hope in this place, while others might not see any future for their children in this region. Yet, there are others who firmly believe that they are here to stay and to be a witness for an open, active, and dynamic community in the birthplace of Christianity. I believe that we, as Christians in Palestine, are not spectators but actors in our history. We cannot, as living stones, but engage ourselves, make our hands dirty, get involved in these changes so that a state of the best public well being and welfare emerges. At a time when despair and hopelessness are growing, our role as Palestinian Christians can be best summed up in the words of Martin Luther: “Even if I knew that the world is coming to an end tomorrow, today I would go out to my garden and plant an apple tree,” or as we say in Palestine in a more contextual way, “plant an olive tree.” Because only then will our children, after tomorrow, have a shade to play under, have olive oil to heal wounds, and have olive branches to wave as a sign for the peace to come.

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