

Britain and the Palestinian Christians

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In her book entitled *Prophecy and Politics: The Secret Alliance Between Israel and the U.S. Christian Right*, the American writer, Grace Halsell, who used to write the political speeches for the late US President Lyndon Johnson, recounts the story of her visit to the Palestinian city of Nazareth – a visit she made along with a delegation of American Christians who made a tour of holy Christian places in Israel.

Halsell recounts: “Before arriving at Nazareth, the Israeli tour guide announced that we would not make a stop at this city. No one from the group inquired about the reason for making this decision and the reason for refraining from visiting the city in which Jesus Christ spent the years of his life starting from 12 years old until he was 30 years old. However, the tour guide changed his mind and informed us that we would make a twenty-minute stop at Nazareth. The justification he offered was using the toilets. As soon as the car stopped, each one of us went to a store in order to use the toilet. After twenty minutes, we rode in the car once again without touring the city. I tried to imagine a Buddhist heading to a temple of Buddha in Kamakura, Japan.”

Last month, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, made an official tour in Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the State of Palestine.

The Israelis drew up the program of his visit to the Occupied Territories. They did not include in the program the cities of Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Nazareth houses the Church of the Annunciation, which was built over the place where the Virgin Mary received the divine announcement that she is carrying the Christ in her womb while she remained a virgin. As a result, the Church of the Annunciation is considered one of the most important holy places for Christians. Therefore, it was strange not to include this church in the program of the Archbishop’s visit!

Also, the City of Bethlehem, which houses the Church of the Nativity, constitutes one of the most important landmarks, origins and religious symbols of Christianity that saw parts of Jesus Christ’s life, was similarly not included on the program of the Archbishop’s visit.

It was natural that Palestinian Christians would feel bewildered not because of the Israeli action but the Archbishop’s acceptance of this conduct.

It is known that the cities of Bethlehem and Nazareth have maintained their Arab identity in spite of the Israeli Occupation. It is also known that Israel is always keen on keeping its international

visitors, whether they are politicians or religious figures, out of the way of making contact with Arab Palestinians, especially Christian ones. What the American writer, Halsell, has mentioned is one indication of that. In her story, Halsell recounts that when it was Sunday prayer time, the American Christian delegation was not allowed to go to the church in Jerusalem, which houses many churches, so that they would not make any contact with Palestinian Christians. Halsell further recounts that the delegation members were made to pray at one of the halls in the hotel in which they were staying.

In spite of the presence of an Anglican parish composed of Arab Christians in Israel and the West Bank, the national role played by this parish along with other Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches in the Occupied Territories and in spite of the statement entitled *A Moment of Truth* that was jointly published by these churches condemning the Israeli Occupation as being inconsistent with Christian doctrine, Archbishop Justin Welby stuck to the visit program drawn up by the Israelis in contrast with his predecessor, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, when he made a similar visit in 2006.

In his visit, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was accompanied by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. Both of the archbishops noticed the vicious Israeli blockade imposed on the Palestinian Christian cities, especially Bethlehem, which was disconnected from Jerusalem by a series of military roadblocks and humiliating checkpoints. They also noticed how the Palestinians are humiliated and their freedom is abused at these checkpoints. Upon returning to London, it was a matter of conscience for Archbishop Williams to speak about what he himself witnessed and suffered. So, he wrote an article that was published in the London-based *Times* criticizing these Israeli measures that humiliate not only Christian Palestinians individuals but every human being. In his article, he called upon Christians to pray for their Arab Christian brethren, so that they overcome the tragedy they confront under the Israeli Occupation.

Archbishop Williams went even further. He stated that Britain, his country, bears the responsibility of "ignorance and shortsightedness" in what the conditions of the Palestinian Christians has become, and called for not turning a blind eye to their tragedy.

When the Palestinian Christians expressed their pain for the silence of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, by capitulating to the visit program drawn up by the Israelis that denied him contact with them and inspecting their religious places in Nazareth and Bethlehem, the *Times newspaper* responded to these feelings by publishing an article reminding Welby about his predecessor's position and stating that his visit "rightly provoked and infuriated Palestinian Christians".

The Palestinian Anglican Church was one of the signatory churches to the *Moment of Truth* document. This document, which is known by its Latin name "Kairos", states that "any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person or another, or by one people on another, turns religion into a human ideology and strips the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth . . . For that purpose, we declare that

the Israeli occupation is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their human rights, bestowed by God We declare also that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests, and distorting the divine image in the human beings living under both political and theological injustice.”

Considering that the Anglican Church is the Church of the Britain and that Britain is morally and historically responsible for the catastrophe that befell the Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Israel and the lands of the State of Palestine was an occasion for expressing opposition to this “political and theological injustice”. However, the visit dashed the hopes of Palestinian Christians. A high-profile official in the Palestinian Authority, who is a Christian from Bethlehem, expressed his profound dissatisfaction “because this visit proved that Palestinian Christians were not an object of concern for the top British Christian visitor!” Not only has this harmed the Christians, but it has also harmed the Palestinian Anglican Church that plays a leading role in the Christian national movement.

The *A Moment of Truth* document has laid its finger on what is wrong when it stated: “our presence in this land, as Christian and Muslim Palestinians, is not accidental but rather deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land, resonant with the connectedness of any other people to the land it lives in. It was an injustice when we were driven out. The West sought to make amends for what Jews had endured in the countries of Europe, but it made amends on our account and in our land. They tried to correct an injustice and the result was a new injustice.” Alas, “Oh David, for whom do you read your psalms?”

Source: Al-Ittihad newspaper