

New Trends of Research on PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN ISRAEL

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Christians in Israel and in the Middle East, our present and future.

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1. Who we are?

We are Christians here in Israel and at the same time we are Christians in the Middle East. We are four families of Churches, all, except one, the Assyrian Church of the East, gathered in the Middle East Council of Churches, with its seat in Beirut, Lebanon. The four families are the Orthodox family (Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Cyprus), the Eastern family (Copts of Alexandria, Syrians of Antioch, and Armenians of Cilicia with their see in Antelias in Lebanon; the Armenians of Jerusalem, refer to Etchmiadzin in Armenia), the Catholic family, with seven patriarchates (Alexandria, the Copts; Antioch, the Greek Catholics, the Syro-Catholics and the Maronites; Baghdad, the Chaldeans; Lebanon (Bzummar), the Armenians; and Jerusalem, the Roman Catholics or Latins). In 1990, the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East was established, with its seat in Beirut. The World Council of Churches (WCC), was created in the first half of the 20th century and it gathers together almost all the world Churches, including the three families of Churches in the Middle East: Orthodox, Eastern and Protestant or Evangelical. The Catholic Church is not a member, but cooperates in many fields with the Council.

Church and ethnicity: one notes in the names of the Churches of the Middle East, the ethnic/linguistic root of each one of them: Greek, Copt, Syrian, Chaldean, Assyrian, Armenian, Latin or Roman. The name can denote the use of the language of prayer, like Latin (or Roman), while an ethnic sense has remained for some and disappeared for many others: thus the Roman Catholic (Latin) faithful, here and in the region, see themselves as Arabs. The Greek Orthodox are not necessarily ethnically Greek: the hierarchy has remained so in

Jerusalem and Alexandria but the faithful underline their Arab belonging, and in Antioch the hierarchy is Arab since the end of the 19th century. This sense of belonging to the Arab world characterizes the Greek Catholic Church too. The Copts in Egypt kept the language only in liturgy, strongly reintroduced by Popes Kirill VI and Shenouda III to promote a sense of separate identity because the Church was almost completely Arabized for centuries. They feel that they belong to the Arab world, but they also have a sense of being different. The Syriac tradition Churches (Syrian, Maronite, Chaldean and Assyrian), have preserved the Syriac language in varying degrees in the liturgy and, in some areas, at home too, but alongside Arabic. Some according to time and place, have promoted the sense of being a non-Arab people, belonging to the Arab world.

What needs to be remembered is the Christian contribution to Muslim Arab society. During the period of the Caliphate, Christians played an active and constructive role: they translated Greek culture into Arabic and were a main motor of cultural development. Within the Arab awakening in the 19th century and even now, Christians have had an important role, even before being joined by Muslims. In this awakening, Christians, often influenced by the French Revolution, tried to define relations between state and religion. Many of the founders of modern political parties were Christians and their aim was to establish a kind of secular society, in which all citizens were equal and not discriminated against because of their religion. The secularist Baath party succeeded in taking power in Syria and Iraq, creating a degree of security for Christians and other minorities, instituting a separation between religion and state, even if it could not totally disregard Islam. However, neither could it implement democracy; it established rather dictatorial regimes.

2. Christians in Israel and Palestine: The leaders of the Churches.

Here in Israel and Palestine, the four families of Churches are present: the Orthodox (Greek, Russian and Rumanian), the Eastern (Armenian, Coptic, Syrian and Ethiopian), the Catholic (Greek, Roman Catholic or Latin, Maronite, Syrian, Armenian and Chaldean) and the Protestants (Lutherans and Anglicans, and other denominations). We are diverse, that means we have different liturgies rooted in different languages. We are hierarchically divided,

autonomous from one another. Altogether we are a small community, about 2% of the population in Israel and Palestine. To this enumeration, we must add the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, Custodians of the Holy Places for the universal Catholic Church.

Although we are diverse and hierarchically divided, most of the time we enjoy good relations. We have common meetings in order to deal with questions concerning the religious, social and political life of our people. Our main feasts, Christmas and Easter, follow two different calendars nevertheless we have a long tradition of exchanging wishes and visiting each other on these occasions.

When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which we are living, the faithful expect the Church to speak out for justice and the advocacy of rights, and our duty is to raise our voice. Sometimes, it is difficult to reach a consensus in this field, because of the concept of the relationship between Church and politics, and because of various pressures from the political authorities. It is easier to send a strong clear message about what is happening in Syria and Iraq than about what is happening in Jerusalem.

Some of us would insist: intervening in the political situation in order to say clearly who is the oppressed, who is the oppressor, to raise our voice to give a strong message to both parties is simply a human right and religious obligation, even when it enrages the political establishment. Others might say: what is related to the conflict is politics and we, as Church, should stay out of it. Hence the statements of the Church, when they are published, are often very mild and say little if anything at all. The political authorities, for their part, tell us: the conflict, the occupation, all that, is politics, and you, religious leaders, keep away from it, speak about peace, pray for peace, and remain distant and quiet, busy with your prayers and incense.

Therefore the question for all of us is: What kind of approach should we adopt as religious leaders regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine? A second question is: what should be the relationship between the Church and the state? Should we take a stand regarding the oppressed and the oppressor or should we keep silent? A Christian religious leader has to be on the side of the poor, the oppressed. Doing so, he is not forcibly antagonistic to the other party. He should not be against anyone. He is pro-human and pro-life and cares about

the good of both parties. But when one is oppressed he has to say this one is oppressed, and this oppression must end. As the Second Vatican Council states:

The Council wishes passionately to summon Christians to cooperate, under the help of Christ the author of peace, with all men in securing among themselves a peace based on justice and love and in setting up the instruments of peace (Gaudium et Spes, 77).

3. Christians in Israel, the people

First, a basic Christian principle is the universality of vision: if I am suffering, I am not suffering alone. All those with whom I live are in the same situation of conflict and war, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Therefore, in looking for an end to my sufferings, I have to care for all those who suffer around me, whatever their nationality or religion might be.

A second principle is loyalty to oneself and one's people. Hence, for the indigenous Christians in Israel, what is at stake is not simply a question of Christian-Israeli relations, but rather the general relation between Israelis and Palestinians. Indigenous Christians are Palestinians and Arabs (except for a small group that is Hebrew speaking). So we are both part of the conflict and part of the efforts to make peace. We are a part of those under occupation and a part of those suffering discrimination. Hence, the Christian Palestinian's attitude is both Palestinian and Christian (demanding freedom, an end to the occupation, equality...,) characterized by the Christian spirit and way.

Two different situations are to be distinguished, concerning Christian Palestinians in Israel. The first is in the Occupied Territories, the second, inside Israel. In the Occupied Territories, Christians are under military occupation, dominated by a regime of checkpoints and other difficulties of daily life. The Christian's contribution is that of any citizen who finds himself in a similar situation: to take all legitimate measures to put an end to this occupation and to attain independence and freedom. The legitimate measures, of course, must be in harmony with the principles of Christian faith and Church teaching, the basic commandment being of love.

Inside Israel, Christian Palestinians are citizens. They have the duties and should have the rights of citizens. They should be loyal to the state but also loyal to themselves: demanding equality and an end to all discrimination. One aspect of their loyalty to Israel can be expressed as a determination to help Israel rid itself of its "problem" with the Palestinians, by ending the occupation.

Inside Israel, Christians are faced with another issue, that of personal security. Christians inside Israel feel insecure. Inter-Palestinian crimes are rarely followed up, though the guilty parties are often well known. In many cases, the police do not respond to complaints. And when tensions arise between Christians and Muslims, between Druze and Muslims or between Druze and Christians, the police often do not act. We might raise the question: do the police have their own agenda? Are the authorities, in fact, promoting a "divide and rule" policy, even sometimes actively promoting these tensions? Inside Palestinian society in Israel, whether Muslim, Christian or Druze, those who feel protected are those who have their own guns. Those who are armed are usually agents of the government, whether Muslims, Christians or Druze.

A new Christian issue has been raised inside Israel: there are voices among Christians, encouraged by the authorities, who have begun to say "we are not Arabs, we are Arameans". Where does this imaginative discourse come from? Perhaps it has its roots in an imagined past: it is true that some of us, Christians, spoke Aramaic, centuries ago, like the Jews. However, history has been ongoing and has transformed situations and peoples. Today, we are what we are: Palestinians, Arabs and Christians. Resurrecting some distant past does not automatically separate one from his or her people. When one is faced by a difficult present, it is not always healthy to escape into a "mythical" past and bury oneself in it. It is usually best to face the present challenges and to help others to face these challenges. On the other hand, I would say to a Christian Palestinian who now claims to be Aramean and not Arab: If you want to express a special loyalty to Israel, start being loyal to yourself. If you are not loyal to yourself you will be loyal to no one. I do not think, this "flight of imagination" will be of any help to Israel. Loyalty does not mean providing Israel with more soldiers in the army or more collaborators in society. It is no help to the Christians, even if some of them will profit as individuals, getting jobs, admissions to universities and so on. This "flight of imagination" is rather an

added element of confusion and internal dissention, inside Israel and among the Christian Palestinian Israeli citizens.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land in a statement published on September 18, 2014, said: "The vocation of the Christian is not to suddenly become an Aramean nor to go to war. Rather the vocation of the Christian is to point the way to peace and to walk in its path. This peace must be built on the dignity of each human being, Palestinian and Jewish. Blessed are the peace makers for they truly serve God and humanity, all humanity, Palestinians and Israelis and the whole region".

4. Christians in the Middle-East

If I now widen the perspective, I will apply the same principles to my vision of Christians throughout the Middle East. In the region, there are so many suffering: we are not alone in our suffering. Many more are suffering with us.

The Catholic Patriarchs of the East had already perceived this communion with the human person in the region. In their second Pastoral Letter, published in 1992, echoed again in their tenth Pastoral Letter in 2009, they said: "The whole society is affected by the Arab socio-political failure. Christians too, because they do not live separated from their societies. Like the others, perhaps more than the others, they are affected by the conflicts that exist in the region. They are even the first victims, as it appears from the present situation in Israel and Iraq (Revolutions in 2011 had not still expanded to all the Arab countries). Therefore, all the society, Muslims and Christians, are living in perplexity..." (n. 8).

The Christian presence in the Middle East is first an internal question: How Christians understand themselves and their role in their societies, and their relations with Muslims, and here, with Jews. Second, it is an external question that depends on the West's global political view and planning for the region.

How do we understand ourselves, what is the reality of ethnic differences that have survived up until today in some countries? A Christian belongs to his people, to his country and to his society, just as every human being in each

one's country and society. We constitute a small number, but we are not minorities in the sense of being a foreign element in our countries. And we say: we are not numbers, neither are we proportions, we are human beings one hundred per cent. Each one is a creature of God, just like everyone else in the country, Muslim, Jew, Druze or Christian. We belong to our people, whatever the behavior of our people might be, welcoming or persecuting as it happens to be now in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, as Christians, we are sent to our people: we are bearers of a mission, we have a message to our people, to adhere to its identity, and to contribute to the building up and defense of our society, in all circumstances, easy or difficult, as it is at present. Jesus told us: you are the salt, the light in your societies. That means we have to bring to our public life a taste of living, our Christian values and ways.

Christians do not necessarily agree on any one particular ideal position. This is a reality. But we have to educate our Christians in this vision and spirit. Whatever be the behavior of our society, our behavior as Christians will be involvement in all its events and evolutions. Central to us as Christians is to be always insistent on our commandment: love each other, your neighbors and even your enemies.

How do our societies deal with us?

The issue is twofold. Firstly, within each country, it is an issue of achieving total equality, difficult to attain, as long as the population is perceived as being made up of Muslims and Christians. The state is obligated to take religion into consideration. Secondly, today, with ongoing revolution, a process that began in January 2011, we are facing the threatening progress of Islamic militias (like ISIS) and their like who have already had an effect on the Christians in Syria and Iraq: massacres and forced emigration.

Second, the Christian presence in the Middle East is an external question that depends on the West's global political view and planning for the region. This means that Christian presence ultimately will depend on the Western powers and their planning for the region. Christians do not seem to exist within this planning by Western powers. Their criteria seem to be only political and

economic interests, and we, Christians, are of no interest to them, neither in politics nor in economy, not when declaring wars nor when provoking violent changes of regime, as was the case in the invasion of Iraq. In these cases, if we, Christians, survive, it is OK. If we are massacred, there are voices of compassion. If we become refugees, the Western powers might send us humanitarian help, they maintain refugee camps, or even give us entry visas for emigration. But their “realpolitik” does not change. This is a main danger for our future as Christians in the region.

As for the relations between Muslims and Christians, they are not only a challenge for us, they are our mission, and we will continue to engage in this mission, as our ancestors always have, ever since the times of the first Caliphates and right until the modern Arab awakening.

5. Our future

Our future here, as Christians in Israel and Palestine, depends upon the future of Israel and Palestine. If stability can be achieved, it will be stability and prosperity for all, Christians included. If war continues, it will be instability, social and economic for Christians as well as for all. It will remain a period of confusion due to war, politic interests, poverty, need for jobs, for equality of opportunities, education etc... it will be a period of insecurity, physical and moral, the human person will be used and abused for "security reasons". For those of us who want just to live, without any ideal, it will be a time of desperation and slow death, whether we are called “Christians” or “Arameans”.

Keeping in mind all those external factors, local and international, we have mentioned and the socio-political evolution of the region, our future as Christians depends ultimately on ourselves, on our own faith. The 10th Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East states: "The future of the Christians of the East is in the hands of God and in their own hands. It is in their hands in the measure in which their faith becomes a spiritual strength within themselves, with which they face challenges, take necessary steps and contribute to the common effort of building".

Our future is a question of our role in our societies, it is a question of our relations with Muslims. It is a question of the conflict between Israelis and

Palestinians. It is a question of the Western powers' planning for the region... However, it is mainly a question of faith. Without faith we will be a question of simply another minority, and a struggle between small numbers and large numbers, while we remain at the mercy of savage egoistical forces swirling around us.

If it is a question of faith this means that we have a mission, we are a mission, wherever we are, in all circumstances, easy and less easy, peace and war. With faith, with our sense of being a people with a mission, we are strong, strong not to kill or to be aggressive against anyone, but to better love and contribute to the general human building of a fraternal society, in which everyone finds himself as a brother or sister. If we are faced by death and massacres, we have to educate ourselves to live the sense of being a martyr: giving our life for the life of our societies, even for those who kill us, so that even these may also reach the true sense of life. This might seem to be too idealistic, but, it has to be so, facing the hard realities of our days which might become worse day to day. In a normal situation, where we are not faced directly by death and persecution, our choice is our vocation: to share in the building of our society. In exceptional situation, where we are faced directly by death, we have two choices: to become soldiers and form armies to kill some of our enemies and to be killed for politics, on the one hand, or to give our life as martyrs for our faith and for the life of our own enemy, on the other hand. The second alone is the Christian choice. It was the choice of the first Christians here in Jerusalem, in the Middle East and in the entire Roman Empire. They died for their faith and for the life of their persecutors, and finally they won.

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