

Will they become the equals of Israel's Jews? Will they be able to return to their villages of 1948?



The Fifth Column: A Response to Michele Chabin's Article in USA Today

By Rifat Odeh Kassis

March 2014 - On reading Michele Chabin's article "Israeli Christians seek integration, including army service" in USA Today, published on March 14, 2014 – an article focusing on certain Christians' decision to participate in activities run by the Israeli state, on different public responses to that decision, and on the Israeli government's direct recruitment of Christians for the Israeli army and other bodies – I stopped short at three points. Each point represents a major falsehood, misrepresentation, misunderstanding, or reduction; each point opens a door onto subjects unexplored in Chabin's article, subjects we must discuss in order to truly understand the reality of Christians in Israel and Palestine.

The first word that made me pause appears in the title: the integration in "Israeli Christians seek integration..." The use of this word makes me think of the many immigrants to Europe who struggle to understand their marginalization within their new social contexts and often blame themselves for it; what they don't see are the policies and attitudes that prevent them from becoming an integral part of society. In the case of Israel, then, some Christians fail to see the discriminatory policies, laws, and practices against non-Jewish citizens. (The fundamental tension of the Israeli state itself – its self-definition as both a democracy and a Jewish nation, its desire to serve as a model of democratic ideals and its simultaneous insistence on maintaining a Jewish majority – is often referenced and crucial to remember here.)

Victims of this systematic discrimination often vote for the most right-wing parties in their new host countries – thinking, whether consciously or unconsciously, that becoming members of the hardline right will grant them the integration they yearn for. They try to become, in other words, more Catholic than the Pope. And will this help them? Of course not: they will remain “outsiders” in the eyes of the majority, will remain unwanted, will remain the “other” that the right-wing wishes to exclude. This is the same fate that non-Jewish citizens suffer in the state of Israel, despite the fact that they are not immigrants (and that, indeed, their families have lived there for generations upon generations), and no matter what they do to prove the contrary.

The second point that struck me is the quote from a Palestinian Christian man who serves with the Israeli army in the city of Hebron – I’ll call him “the victim,” because he has been damaged by the system that marginalizes him and yet brainwashes him into seeking this form of acceptance. This victim should accompany other victims, like the refuseniks (young Jewish Israeli citizens who refuse to fulfill their mandatory army service), who see, for example, the Jewish settlers in Hebron as the major threat to the Israeli state. These settlers insist on living in the very heart of a Palestinian community, depriving Palestinians of water, use of the streets, access to schools and hospitals and places of worship; forbidding them from practicing normal life in scores of other ways; and often physically assaulting them. They maintain that all these practices contribute to the security of the state of Israel, and they consider all non-Jews to be outsiders who should be evacuated from “their” country. The Ibrahimi Mosque massacre, committed in 1994 by American-born Israeli Baruch Goldstein, is just one example of this mentality.

The victim’s decision to “serve” the settlers in Hebron, protecting them in their enclaves, will not change their opinion of him. Moreover, the Israeli decision to assign this and other victims to a military post in Hebron is a telling one. Israel didn’t dispatch him to the state borders, or to Bethlehem or Ramallah, where he would have been in contact with his Christian sisters and brothers: stopping them at checkpoints, humiliating them at roadblocks, arresting their children in the middle of the night. This contact could have awakened some uncomfortable, important feelings in him: feelings of confusion, feelings of connection with the people whose oppression he was sent to enact. Israel does not want this to happen: the idea is to sever those possible connections, to fragment communities, to quash empathy and solidarity where it might arise among Palestinians of any and all backgrounds. These divisive tactics are appearing more and more in national legislation: on February 24 of this year, the Israeli Knesset passed a bill that creates a legal distinction between Christians and Muslims, categorizing Christians as non-Arabs. Israel actively seeks to make Palestinians forget that they share a history, a community, and a struggle. The only way its victims can “protect” their country is by refusing to serve as another instrument of their own occupation and oppression.

The third and final point I must take issue with is a quote from the writer herself: “Indigenous Christians say they can trace their roots back 2,000 years to the time of Jesus. But they complain they feel sometimes like second-class citizens in the Jewish homeland and are denied top private-sector jobs and positions in government.” They feel sometimes like second-class citizens? The author must know, as any halfway competent observer knows, that non-Jewish citizens of Israel rank as second- or third- or fourth-class citizens. In the social hierarchy that is the Israeli state, Ashkenazi Jews are the privileged first class, followed by Sephardic Jews. (These two categories contain other sub-ranks and divisions, of course, but this is not the topic of my text.) The Druze, who have been serving in the army and

“protecting” their country for the past 50 years rank third or fourth; despite their service, they are continually subjected to discrimination in many professional and social contexts and their cities are not allocated the budgets that Jewish ones are.

What about Christians, then? Will they become the equals of Israel’s Jews? Will they be able to return to the villages they were expelled from in 1948 and many years thereafter? (Let’s think of the village of Iqrit: in 1951, the Supreme Court ruled that the villagers could go back and inhabit their homes. But the military government found pretexts to refuse their return, and the Israeli army destroyed the entire village later that year.) Will Israel have a Christian prime minister soon? Or a president of the state? History, policy, and reality respond with an overwhelming “no.” The population of Israel is 20% non-Jews, in addition to thousands of Russians, Asians, and Africans, both Jews and non-Jews. Yet the state discourse, policies, and practices insist on Israel’s Jewishness above all else. It is not interested in equality. It needs second-class citizens to be what it is.

In any situation of oppression, some of the oppressed direct their anger toward the oppressors. But some do not. Instead, they channel their frustration toward their peers, their fellow oppressed. They try to erase their past, hoping that the future will bring them a better lot in life, a new reality – and often, in the process, becoming more racist than their most bigoted neighbours.

Nonetheless, history reminds us that these projections will never truly help the oppressed. Their oppressors will continue to see them as strangers – or, at best, as a fifth column, a group used to undermine their own country without ever gaining the respect of those who seek to serve them.