



HOLY LAND

Christians in the Holy Land Conference 2011

Speech: The Rt Hon Lord Howell of Guildford

LAMBETH PALACE, LONDON, 18-19 JULY 2011

May I begin by thanking the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams and the Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols for organising this timely and relevant conference to discuss this very important issue; and for extending a kind invitation to me to speak here today.

The treatment of Christians worldwide and more broadly the freedom of individuals to worship or practise their own religion or belief without discrimination or persecution, is a vital issue and one which is of increasing concern given the problems faced by religious minorities in recent months and indeed years across the Middle East region. The media has been focussed on the ugly developments in Egypt, Iraq, Iran and the world. Barely a day goes by without a grim reminder of the world we live in.

Christian emigration from the Holy Land

The Middle East is the birth place of Christianity. Over time the Christian Community there have faced challenges, particularly in the Holy Land. They have felt vulnerable or at least disadvantaged and have emigrated in disproportionate numbers. In 1946 the Christian community was 22% of the population in British Mandatory territory of Palestine. It is now less than 2% of today's society in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This emigration has caused a loss of religious and cultural diversity in the Holy Land and has wider profound short and long-term implications for the future stability of the region, not least in terms of prospects for future negotiation of an agreement on the status of Jerusalem. This is a central issue in the MEPP.

It is clear, however, that although Christians in the region have been a minority, they have played a major role in every facet of life in their communities over the past 2000 years. We see this contribution everywhere across the Occupied Palestinian Territories from schools to hospitals, such as St Luke's Hospital in Nablus that serves the whole of the Palestinian community regardless of faith, and the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza providing desperately needed health care to thousands of Gazans in the face of the grave humanitarian situation there. In Israel, the monasteries and pilgrim-houses ministering to the thousands of Christians who visit the Holy Land are an eloquent reminder of Christianity's roots. The spirit of the people working in these places, with their love for others, embodies Christianity's message of self-sacrifice and service. And we should remember that compared to elsewhere in the region, the Christian Community in Israel does have extensive rights to practise their religious beliefs.

Problems Christians (and others) face

But there are problems. Although Palestinian Christians are concentrated in Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jerusalem, travel between these places remains very difficult due to the restrictions on freedom of movement. This is especially true between West bank and East Jerusalem. The permit system for Palestinians to enter East Jerusalem for education, medical treatment and religious worship is lengthy and complicated. There are heartbreaking stories of sons and daughters unable to obtain permits in time to visit parents dying in a hospital or to attend funerals of relatives. Those Palestinians who do have regular permits can spend hours queuing every morning at the checkpoints. We have lobbied the Israelis hard on the issue of movement and access. Last year there were some improvements in the West Bank, but we believe there is still some way to go.

A Jerusalem Resident permit for Palestinians is another area of concern. There are currently around 200 Christian families forced to live apart because they cannot obtain permits to stay together and because of the shrinking pool of Christians in East Jerusalem, Christians sometimes end up marrying West Bankers, and have to move to the West Bank because they cannot get permits to live together in East Jerusalem, which reduces the Christian numbers further. If a Jerusalemite moves to the West Bank, within two years they risk losing their Jerusalem ID unless they can prove that Jerusalem is the centre of their life. Alistair Burt, the FCO Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, visited Israel and the Occupied Territories earlier this month. He raised the difficulties faced by Christians and in particular the impact of residency restrictions in Jerusalem.

Since the take-over of Gaza by Hamas in 2007, the small, Christian community – along indeed with many secular Palestinians – has found itself increasingly vulnerable to Islamic extremism and intolerance. Religious laws are rarely formally announced and enforced but the pressure to wear the veil and for men and women to be separated in public has grown. The YMCA has been attacked. The great stone cross in one of the commonwealth war cemeteries there disfigured. Most of the problems Christians suffer in Israel and the Occupied Territories stem from the mutual mistrust that characterises Israeli-Palestinian relations. We see negotiations towards a two state solution as the best way to resolve this conflict: meeting the national aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians and leading to a sovereign, viable and contiguous Palestinian state, living in peace and security alongside a safe and secure Israel and a stable region. This remains the ambition for which we work.

The UK Government are concerned about the issues surrounding Christians in the Holy Land as I have just described for three reasons; firstly the future viability of the Christian Community in the Holy Land is in question; secondly the decrease in the Christian population has an impact on the preservation of the Christian religious sites, which are of global importance; and thirdly the decrease of the Christian community send the wrong signals about religious plurality and diversity in the Holy Land as we remember that Jerusalem is a holy city to Christians, Judaism and Islam.

So what is the UK government doing about this?

Matthew Gould, our Ambassador in Tel Aviv and Sir Vincent Fean, the Consul-General in Jerusalem, take this issue seriously and continue to lobby the appropriate authorities hard on the issue of movement and access. And as I mentioned earlier, our Minister for the Middle East, Alistair Burt, made representations during his visit earlier this month.

The Government places real importance on the right to freedom of religion for all. It is in our values of the country and our struggle to emerge from darker periods in our history. The Government strongly supports the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief and the right to freedom of opinion and expression as set out in the key international human rights instruments, namely the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the relevant 1981 United Nations Declaration (on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief).

As the Foreign Secretary has made clear on many occasions, the effective promotion of human rights, including religious freedom, is central to our British foreign policy. Freedom of religion or belief is a priority human rights issue for the government and the Foreign Secretary has tasked officials to look at ways of strengthening our policy in this area. As part of this work, earlier this month, FCO Minister Alistair Burt hosted a Wilton Park Conference on promoting religious freedoms around the world. The event was attended by religious leaders, NGOs, parliamentarians and members of the Foreign Secretary's Advisory Group on Human Rights. We will now be taking forward the insight and opinions of the attendees for our policy review.

Although some of what I have mentioned today and personal accounts from yesterday that you heard may sound disheartening; on a note of hope, the Arab Spring reminds us that the mood of change is in the air. Though we need to ensure that it doesn't turn into an Arab Autumn.

In Egypt, we saw Muslims and Christians standing shoulder to shoulder during protests calling for change, with shared hopes for an inclusive, participatory democracy. In the long term the Arab Spring and the driving forces behind it may change things for all, Christians, Muslims, Jews and all faiths in the region for the better.

I hope my words won't sound too negative but will assure you all here that the government is committed to protecting and defending the rights of all religious groups, including Christians around the world. We will continue to proactively promote and protect the freedoms of individuals to worship or practice their own religion or belief without discrimination or persecution. We will continue to condemn all instances of violence and discrimination against individuals and groups because of their faith or belief wherever they occur and whatever the religion of the individual or group concerned. And we will continue to make the case that Jerusalem should be a holy city for all faiths.

Perhaps that last point is the most central one of all. For a thousand years, Jerusalem has been the seat of Jewish sovereignty. For Muslims it was and is the city of the great Islamic prophets – Abraham, David, Solomon and Jesus. For Christians it is the holiest of cities where Jesus preached, suffered, was buried and rose again – the very centre, so the mediaeval Christian world held – of the whole earth.

Jerusalem is an idea in which there should be room for all. If we cannot match that vision of a city upon a hill with room for all faiths, with the reality of the Holy Land today, then we are letting down generations to come and betraying the faiths of generations past.

Let us hope that we can succeed and overcome current challenges, and that Christians and others can live in peace and brotherhood in the land and the city which are holy for so large a part of mankind.