



HOLY LAND

Christians in the Holy Land Conference 2011

Article: We are Christians of the Holy Land!

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Haig is an Armenian Christian from Jerusalem, just six miles and twenty minutes north of Bethlehem.

Haig also happens to be my younger brother, and our family have lived in Jerusalem ever since 1915 when my grandparents fled Ottoman Turkey to Palestine during the Armenian genocide. Indeed, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the fulcra of the Nativity and Resurrection of our Christian faith, were once bustling with local Christians. In Jerusalem, two of the four quarters of the Old City – the Christian and Armenian - are a living testimony to their centuries-old presence. Yet, today, although my brother and his family have steadfastly chosen to remain in Jerusalem, scores of Christians have left in search of more dignified, politically stable and economically viable alternatives.

So what do Christians witness in this land of so many pilgrimages but of so few visions? Some sixty short years ago, Christians constituted roughly 25% of the overall Palestinian population in the Holy Land, and around 80% of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. Today, those numbers have dwindled drastically - in Bethlehem, for instance, they are just over 15% of the overall population - largely because of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. No matter how people choose to interpret facts or massage realities, the political situation has been - and remains - the primary cause for the alarming reduction in the number of indigenous Christians in this biblical land.

Christians have almost lost hope in a land that witnessed the incarnation of our hope. Dr Bernard Sabella, a sociologist and Member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, has published numerous statistical studies on the haemorrhaging outflow of local Christians. In one study as far back as 2004, he estimated that local Christians now stood at far less than 2% of the overall population, suggesting that this decline reflected a dearth in socio-economic and political visions for Palestine.

Over the past forty-three years, since the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in June 1967, rapacious Israeli settlers have colonised Palestinian land - often aided, and frequently abetted, by successive Israeli governments. The physical, demographic and economic integrity of the land - and thereby of the people living on it - has been eroded by deliberate Israeli policies that are not only contrary to International law and UN Resolutions but also strive to get rid of Palestinian demography (the people) whilst retaining Palestinian geography (the land).

In Bethlehem as in many other parts of the West Bank, an ugly separation wall encircles relentlessly the Palestinian areas, dividing one Palestinian from another, one institution from another. With secondary and smaller cement walls buttressing this wall, and with Israeli Jews-only settlements on Palestinian land, along with 400 checkpoints severing towns and villages from each other, Palestinian resources are being snuffed out and have resulted in the creation of small gaols within those territories. The consequences have been unemployment, poverty, socioeconomic meltdown, despair and violence. Is it still any wonder that Palestinian Christians are leaving in droves?

In a speech on 29 April 2010, Professor John J Mearsheimer, co-director of the Program on International Security Policy in Chicago, described some Israelis as the New Afrikaners. Indeed, such corrosive apartheid (separateness in Afrikaans) policies are being exercised by Israel in many Palestinian territories where

Christians live in small numbers amongst Palestinian Muslims. Is it also any wonder that some prominent Christians issued the Kairos Palestine Document: A Moment of Truth in December 2009 in which they spoke out about faith, hope and love in the heart of Palestinian suffering and against practices that have condemned their communities to this downward spiral? Can such weakened communities resist any longer?

However, in focusing upon the sinister effects of Israeli occupation, it is equally important to look at other concerns befalling Palestinian Christians in this once golden land (as the prophet Zechariah described it). Two contributory strains, I would opine, are Christian-Muslim relations and Western Christianity.

When I was Ecumenical Consultant for the Churches of Jerusalem during the unlucky Oslo years, I recall how church leaders or their representatives would help nip in the bud any potential strife between Christians and Muslims by calling the late Chairman Yasser Arafat's representatives to seek their prompt mediation. Today, those conduits of conflict resolution are far more complex and much less discernible, and the tensions between Palestinian Christians and Muslims are perceptibly more frequent even if most Palestinians would deny them vehemently due to an overall – albeit anxious – sense of nationalism. I believe this is due in part to a growing political Islamisation within specific cross-sections of Palestinian society in the West Bank (and certainly in Gaza, with its tiny pocket of Christians and their public institutions today).

Some Muslims have become less inclusive, spurn diversity and openly or secretly consider non-Muslims as heretics who do not belong to the land. Such attitudes are due to an ill-considered, even blinkered, belief that the links those Christians have with the larger Universal Church in the West (Greece, Rome or London) could turn them into politically potential fifth columns! I have heard Palestinians speaking out - discreetly - about practices of physical and structural violence whereby Christian shops are the last ones to be frequented for business and where Palestinian Christians are the last to receive financial aid from local authorities.

Engage a Christian ironmonger, butcher, secretary, verger, or physician, and one detects those worries simmering under the chipped veneer of pan-Palestinian solidarity. This is an unfortunate development that is neither Islamic nor provides proper *ijtihad* or jurisprudence. But it occasionally detracts from the collective effort necessary to focus on the central objective of Israeli occupation and is alas a reality that increasingly blights the lives of everyday Christians. But is the radicalisation of some pockets of Islam the sole reason why a small but important number of Palestinian Muslims are looking charily at Palestinian Christians? Has Palestine become an almost Lebanese clone where confessional politics are taking hold of what has for long decades been a fiercely secular and inclusive society? I remember growing up in a neighbourhood of north Jerusalem that had many Muslims who were not only 'neighbours' but also friends. My brother too could tell stories about his own experiences of friendships and respectful coexistence. After all, Palestinians had almost always been united by their political aims, not divided by their religious affiliations.

One cannot also forget that some of the incipient Palestinian liberation leaders were Christian, as are politicians, parliamentarians and ambassadors today. Nor can one bury one's head in the sand. I suggest that the tensions fomented by Islamist radicalism, over and above the Israeli rampant occupation of land, are also exacerbated by fundamentalist evangelical Christian constituencies in the West (largely in the USA) who purport that the Christian faith equates itself with an unquestioning support for Israel. They claim this is because God chose the Israelites as His people and entered into a Covenant with them. It is therefore the duty of Christians, those groups claim, to defend Israel (a political entity) and Israelis (a demographic entity) over the whole of biblical land of Israel (a geographic entity).

In my opinion, such Christians are not only limited in their faith-based periscope but are also ostracising others by adhering rigidly to the tenets of the Old Testament, ignoring the transformative message of the New Testament, being selective in their scriptural and prophetic quotations, and releasing Israelis from their obligations in relation to their covenant with God, let alone toward Palestinians. Surely, to be hemmed in by a faith perception that is literalist or exclusivist is not how our Lord and Saviour would act today. But such Christians also believe the only way for the Messiah to return to earth (and therefore fulfil prophecies in the Book of Revelation) is through the in-gathering of Jews (in modern-day Israel) so they could be converted to Christianity and pave the way for the Second Coming of Christ.

I cannot frankly see many Jews getting terribly excited by this Christian plan! But there exists today a finite tactical alliance whereby Jews overlook the underlying eschatological motivations of some Western Christians in return for their unstinting financial and political support of Israel. The Old Testament has become the organic nexus between [some] Christians and [some] Jews, at the expense of the New Testament and the indigenous followers of Christ across the region.

So where do we Christians of the Holy Land stand today as pilgrims of faith on our journeys of faith? I believe that the three existential challenges I highlighted are together leading some Palestinian Christians to re-calculate constantly their options. HB Michel Sabbah, emeritus patriarch of Jerusalem, delivered a lecture entitled *The Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Christian Presence in the Middle East* in Beirut on 5 May 2010 in which he affirmed that Palestinian Christians are cross-bearing witnesses, whose commandment is one of love, of showing how to build a healthy and inclusive society, and of being true bridges with the outside world. I suppose one could add that Jews, Christians and Muslims are united through Abraham and Sarah, hewn from the same rock (Is 51:1), and so it becomes quintessential to find ways for coexistence in this land between the three monotheistic faiths.

But how can one affirm the Christian presence in the Holy Land? In Bethlehem, for example, in order to dissuade young Palestinian families from leaving the Holy Land, the Franciscan Order is building new flats and offering them to young Palestinian couples in return for low-rent tenancies. This is a practical and critical tool to help combat emigration. But if we mean to tackle the root causes of the problems facing Christians in the Holy Land today rather than deal with the symptoms alone, the first station should be an end to Israeli occupation and its illegal practices. Palestinians must be set free from captivity, imprisonment, separation walls, settlements, ID confiscations and allowed instead to pursue their own destinies and hopes - and to make their own mistakes. Only then could they be expected to put their own house in order - presently in shambles - and become accountable as they edify at long last their independent state.

To those worried about the Christian life, presence and witness across the whole Middle East, I remind them of St Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) who stated, Do not rejoice in the cross in time of peace only, but hold fast to the same faith in time of persecution also. Do not be a friend of Jesus in time of peace only but also in time of persecution. We should do well to abandon our anaemic faith but rather show resoluteness and solidarity reaching out to those in need during times of adversity.

Our hearts go out to those quarantined living stones who face the daily struggles of life in the midst of human pain and unholy conflicts. Our faith does not allow for apathy, nor should it pander to hyper-inflated political correctness or jaundiced cynicism. It is summed up for me by St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians to seek the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). Those living stones cannot become the deadened sites of the Holy Land nor of the wider Middle East?

About the author

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