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## **Palestinian Christians & Foreign Christians**

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Participants: Dr. Jacobus Schoneveld, Dr. Don Peretz, Mrs. Ellen Schoneveld, Mr. Jonathan Kuttub, Mr. Alain Sigella, Mr. Marwan Hujeij, Mr. Adnan Husseini, Ms. Diana Safieh, Ms. Doris Salah, Mr. Abed Abu Diab, Mr. Ishaq Al-Qutub, Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Ms. Deniz Altayli, Ms. Sawsan Baghdadi

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## **SUMMARY**

### **Introduction by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi**

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi welcomed the participants and went on to say the following: "The relationship between Palestinian and foreign Christians is an important subject. The idea is to introduce this subject in order to understand the different elements related to our civil society. There are different schools of thought concerning the question of Arab Christians today. Salah El-Din Hafez wrote in the Egyptian daily *'Al-Ahram'* on 12 November 1997, that in spite of the firm Islamic-Christian solidarity under the sovereignty of the national identity in a multi-religious society, such as exists in most Arab countries, there are still some problems related to the practice of religious ceremonies that led to controversy and clashes between fundamentalist groups. He added that some Europeans and Americans made use of this situation to stir up a 'storm' with regard to religious liberties and the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

Dear friends, after the fall of 'political Zionism' with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and its replacement with 'religious Zionism' represented by the leadership of Benyamin Netanyahu following the elections of May 1996, the fashion has become for the fundamentalist and extremist movements to open the file of the religious dimension, whereas in the past, the emphasis was on democratization in the Third World countries. This, I believe, will only lead to more clashes and controversy.

We, in this organization, call for a rational dialogue and academic and scientific discussion. We try to help decision-makers to avoid being swept away by media campaigns, taking into consideration the importance of this subject; the American Congress, for example, created a committee to defend religious liberties and started talking about the so-called "persecution of Christians in the East"! It is important that Arab Christians should start to raise their voices and make known their points of view through dialogue and discussions, not only to defend their rights, but also to reject this foreign intervention in the Arab home.

### **Dr. Jacobus Schoneveld:**

Foreign Christians come in great numbers to this country from all over the world. They arrive here as pilgrims and tourist groups, stay here for two or three weeks or even less and disappear again. They may number more than a million people every year. Several thousands live here for a longer time on a semi-permanent or permanent basis connected to church institutions, industrial firms, educational institutions or diplomatic missions, etc. Foreign Christians visiting this country on an annual basis or living in it greatly outnumber the estimated 165,000 Palestinian Christians who live in this country: more than 114,000 in Israel and about 51,000 in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including East Jerusalem. In addition, there are unspecified numbers of Hebrew Christians or 'Messianic Jews' and members of mixed Jewish/non-Jewish families who have migrated to this country, especially from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

The question with which we are now occupied is how these two categories of Christians, Palestinian and foreign, who mix with each other in this country, either briefly or for a longer period of time,

relate to each other.

### **Foreign Christians in Search of the Origins of their Faith**

The first foreign Christian we know of who came to this country was Melito, the Bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor. In the account he gives of his visit to the country in around the year 160 AD, as quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea, Melito precisely formulates the purpose of his pilgrimage, which has remained the purpose of most pilgrimages that followed. In a letter to a certain Onesimus Melito wrote:

"Since you have often asked, in your zeal for the true word of God, that selections be made for you from the Law and the Prophets regarding the Savior and all our faith, and furthermore since you wished to learn with accuracy about the ancient books, how many they are in number and how they are arranged, I have endeavored to do just this ... Accordingly, when I went East and was in the place where these things were preached and practiced, and after I had learned the books of the Old Testament accurately and had set down the facts, I sent them to you."

Melito went to those places where the events described in the Holy Scriptures, i.e., the Law and the Prophets, the Old Testament, had happened and studied these scriptures accurately. Melito's words stem from a time when the canon of the New Testament was not yet established, but it is clear that he was also interested in the places connected to the life of Jesus, since he speaks of "the Savior and all our faith." And what Melito described as the "zeal for the true Word of God" is until today a powerful incentive to undertake the journey to this country.

From very early times, Christianity in this country has characteristically been made up of local or indigenous Christians – today we would call them Palestinian Christians – and of foreign Christians, Christians who have come from abroad to visit this country or to live here for a longer stretch of time.

The former group, the Palestinian Christians, have their origins and roots in this land through their ancestors; some of them even trace their origins back to the very first Christians in the world, the first adherents to the Jesus movement, be they of Jewish or Gentile stock, who accepted the message of the gospel; others are descendants of Christians who throughout history moved to this land. Their attachment to the land is very direct and existential. It is their native homeland, the land where they and their ancestors grew up. It is the land where they are at home. One of them, Elias Chacour, wrote a book under the title: '*We belong to the Land*', and significantly did not call it 'The Land belongs to us'. Their link to the land is immediate and unsophisticated. They breathe the air of this land naturally and almost unconsciously.

Foreign Christians, meanwhile, are basically motivated to come here by the same reasons as Melito of Sardis from around 160 of the Common era, i.e., they come in search of the origins of their faith and in order to strengthen their faith out of these origins. Within this group, I distinguish two subcategories, which I would characterize as Christians who come out of concern for the holy places and those who come out of concern for the holy scriptures.

### **Christians of Helena Type: Concern for the Holy Places**

Christians in the first category attempt to get in touch with the origins of their faith through veneration of the holy places where the events on which their faith is founded took place: the place of Christ's birth, the Church of the Nativity, the places where Christ taught, healed, performed miracles, e.g., at the Lake of Tiberias, or in Nazareth, the places where Christ suffered, died and was risen from the dead: Gethsemane, Golgotha, the Holy Sepulchre, or rather the Church of the Anastasis, the Resurrection, but also places connected to events mentioned in the Old Testament.

This category is epitomized in Helena, the mother of the first emperor of the Roman Empire that embraced Christianity. She went on a journey to the Holy Land identifying the places where the main

events of the life and death of Christ had occurred. These places shared so to speak in the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of God revealing himself in human and earthly reality in the person of Jesus Christ who lived, worked, suffered, died and was resurrected in these places, giving them a sacramental value, something of a divine quality.

Helena came here, because her son, the first Christian Roman emperor attached great importance to building beautiful churches at these places, in order to encourage a high level of pilgrimage from all parts of the Roman Empire to the Holy Land and to develop it as an important center of the new state religion, which was to unite the Roman Empire under his rule. From that time on the Christian population, which before Constantine had been a persecuted minority in the country, grew tremendously. In the words of Paul P. Colbi:

"The concluding years of the fourth and the starting years of the fifth century ushered in an epoch of unsurpassed Christian growth in the Holy Land... There were some 2,800,000 souls at that time – more than half Christians. Pilgrims poured in from West and East ... Inducements were offered to those coming to settle in the neighborhood of the holy places. The large influx of newcomers from Western Europe did much to enhance the weal of the local brethren. Several rich noblewomen of the Roman patriciate now wished to end their days in an environment of sanctity, and Jerusalem and Bethlehem were irresistible magnets for them."

#### **Christians of the Origen/Jerome Type: Concern for the Holy Scriptures**

The second category is epitomized by such foreign Christians as the Church father Origen who lived for a considerable period of time in this country, in Caesarea in the third century when the Roman Empire was still pagan, and by Jerome who lived in Bethlehem at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century when the Christian Church had reached the state just described. They came to the Holy Land to get in touch with the origin of their faith not so much through the holy places, but through the holy scriptures. Both Origen and Jerome were eminent Bible scholars. Into this category also fall the many monks who came to the Holy Land from the South and the North, from Egypt and Antioch. They proselytized among the local population and tore down the pagan sanctuaries. They spread the Christian scriptures among the local population, built hospitals and did a lot to Christianize the country.

#### **The Influence of Foreign Christians throughout History**

But the Christianization of the Roman Empire meant also imperial control over the Church, which was particularly felt when in the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries big controversies about Christian doctrine raged in the Church. The emperors wanted the Church to be one in order to function as an integrating factor in the Empire and therefore suppressed deviant opinions. But the deviations were not only of a spiritual nature; behind them were strong ethnic and political interests. Especially in Egypt and Syria (including Palestine) the population very much resented the oppressive rule of the Byzantine emperors. Their rejection of the doctrine about the two natures of Christ adopted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD was for a great deal politically motivated, and eventually led to the split of the so-called Monophysite or Jacobite Churches from the imperially dominated Church, which was nicknamed the Melkite Church, the Church of the King. Since then, one speaks of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches.

In Palestine, this rejection of Chalcedon was to a great extent a revolt by the local population in response to what we may call Byzantine imperialism. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Juvenal, who was originally of the Monophysite persuasion changed fronts and gave in to the pressure of Byzantium during the Council of Chalcedon of 451. When he returned to Jerusalem, there was a revolt by the local Christians, which could only be suppressed by Byzantine military intervention. We have here a clear example of conflict between local and foreign Christians in the Holy Land, in which the Patriarch of Jerusalem sided with the foreign, Chalcedonian elements, but not with the local Christians.

This conflict went on for nearly 200 years, and thus it is not surprising that in 462 AD the native inhabitants of Jerusalem welcomed the Muslim Arabs as liberators. According to W.H.C. Frend,

"Native Christians did not regard Islam as other than a powerful, and indeed noxious, Christian heresy. It could be weighted therefore in the balance against the admitted evil of the Chalcedonians."

The most outstanding example of conflict between local Christians in Palestine and foreign Christians is, of course, the Crusades. The Crusaders were foreign Christians of the Helena type, who were motivated by concern for the holy places rather than the holy scriptures, and also – let us not forget – by far more worldly interests and aspirations, as had been the case with Constantine and the Chalcedonian emperors. No other foreign Christians have to such extent trampled down on local Christians as the Crusaders, who chased the Greek Orthodox Patriarch and all his clergy away and installed a Latin Patriarch and all kinds of European ecclesiastic institutions. As Saul P. Colbi writes:

"The tactless and overweening attitude of the Latins towards the Eastern Christians, manifested particularly in religious affairs, was to engender bitter dislike to a degree that Eastern Christians would eventually prefer Moslem to Latin sovereignty: towns and districts *en bloc*, where the indignant 'Easterners' were many, were to go as far as to welcome the reentry of Islam."

In the following centuries, it was the Franciscan Order that represented the foreign Christians in the country. They were particularly concerned for the holy places and the care for pilgrims and lived in relative peace with the local Christians, although they competed with the Greek Orthodox Church, the Church of the Land, over the possession of the holy places.

The influence of foreign, especially Roman Catholic, Christians was further increased by the pressure exerted on the local Christian communities to establish union with Rome and accept obedience to the Pope. This led to a deep split within the Greek Orthodox Church; a part of it broke with the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem and became the Greek Catholic, or Melkite, Church. Similar splits came about through union with Rome in the Armenian, Syrian and Coptic churches. Foreign Christians became the leading figures in these, so-called, Uniate Churches.

But even within the original Church of the country, the Greek Orthodox Church, there was considerable estrangement between the local Christians and foreign Christians, because the Patriarch was not from the local population, but a Greek who for a very long time usually lived in Constantinople, rather than in Jerusalem. Also most of the higher ranks in the hierarchy were in the hands of Greeks rather than local clergy. This is a situation that still exists in Jerusalem today and causes a lot of tension between the hierarchy and the laity in the Greek Orthodox Church in Israel and Palestine – as distinct from the Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus where the incumbent is a local Christian. The higher clergy of the Uniate Churches in Israel/Palestine also have nowadays local incumbents.

It was in the 19th century after the Holy Land was invaded by Napoleon that the influence of foreign Christians increased enormously. Partly motivated by imperialist aspirations, European powers tried to gain a foothold in the country by posing as the protectors of the Christians: Russia as protector of the Greek Orthodox Church, France as the protector of the Franciscan Order and the Greek Catholic and other uniate Churches.

Until then, foreign Christians in the country were Orthodox and Catholics, and there was no Protestant presence in the country. This changed in 1845 when the British and the German churches established a joint bishopric in Jerusalem. These foreign Christians were of the Origen and Jerome type who were concerned about the origins of their faith in terms of the holy scriptures and aimed at spreading the biblical message according to their interpretation. They established educational institutions of a European type. The Roman Catholics, alerted by these Protestant initiatives, were quick to follow and reestablished the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem that had ceased to exist after the

end of the Crusades.

It was in the second half of the 19th century that everywhere in the country imposing buildings were erected to serve as schools, monasteries, hospitals run by Russian, French, English, Scotch, German and Austrian Christian institutions. They attracted many local Christians and also a great number of local Muslims who received here a European type of education of high quality. Nowadays most of these institutions, although often still financially supported from Europe are being led by Palestinian Christians. The majority of pupils in these educational institutions are Muslims.

The transfer of leading positions in Churches and Christian institutions from foreign hands into local hands did not always go smoothly, but in the Catholic and Protestant Churches the transfer has been practically completed. The Greek Orthodox Church still lags behind in this regard.

Particularly in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century these foreign Christian institutions caused many local Christians to change their church affiliation, mostly at the expense of the Greek Orthodox Church, which saw parts of its flock join the Latin Church, the Anglican or Lutheran Church or other churches. This inner-Christian proselytism caused the Greek Orthodox Church to refrain from ecumenical relations with other churches.

### **Foreign Christians and the State of Israel**

Until now I have dealt with the presence of foreign Christians in Israel/Palestine in view of the nature of this country as the place of origin of Christianity. They were of the Helena type or of the Origen/Jerome type, concerned for the holy places or for the holy scriptures of Christianity.

In the last 50 years there has been an influx of foreign Christians in this country for quite different reasons that have to do with the return of a part of the Jewish people to this land and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Here too, we have to distinguish between two categories of Christians: the first group sees in these events a sign of fulfillment of Biblical prophecy; the other group sees these events in connection with the need for a radical reappraisal of Christian teachings about the Jewish people. Both groups encounter fierce opposition – but for different reasons – among Palestinian Christians.

### **The State of Israel Seen as Sign of Fulfillment of Prophecy**

As far as the first category of Christians are concerned, I cannot do better than quoting Fr. Thomas F. Stransky, the Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies in characterizing this section of Christianity in a lecture held in Rome:

"During one night of late September 1996 in Jerusalem, without notice Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu opened the Hasmonean tunnel next to the Al-Haram Al-Sharif with its sacred Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque. Riots started ... On the same weekend in the Holy City, the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem (ICEJ) had gathered 6,000 Christians from over 100 countries to celebrate the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles, in fulfillment of Zacharia's prophecy (14.16).

"Most of these pilgrims were Protestant fundamentalists. They offered unconditional support to the State of Israel and its present policies, which they judged were right over and against the peace-and-justice concerns of the Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians. They cheerfully heard the address of the Prime Minister whom the ICEJ leader, Jan Willem Van Der Hoeven, introduced with the theological accolade: "If there is proof of a God in heaven, it is the result of the last elections" (in May). Prime Minister Netanyahu returned the compliment. He called the congregants "ambassadors of truth." Israeli TV cameras followed large groups of these Christian visitors who passed through the Hasmonean tunnel and its new exit to the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim quarter – in Christian piety, the holiest Old City streets. Indeed, a clearly visible move from inner piety to outward politics,

and a coalition with the Israeli government freshly in power.’

The Palestinian Christians are alarmed and disgusted by the activities of this category of foreign Christians, although several groups are not so extreme as the so-called International Christian Embassy.

Why do they come to this country? Again I quote Fr. Stransky, who gave in the same paper an excellent summary of their beliefs:

"In every fundamentalist's list of being fulfilled prophecies, the State of Israel plays a central role in the case of divine actors in God's directed penultimate and last act. In short, God's prophesied purpose for Israel has not been fulfilled in the Church but Israel awaits a political-social-religious fulfillment in the form of a restored and perfected Jewish nation under the rule of the returned Jesus the Christ, on the Davidic throne in Jerusalem.

"The Church will cease its mediation of divine grace, and the divinely saved ones will disappear ("be raptured") from history, so that Israel might resume its primary role as God's instrument during 'the last days.'"

### **Rethinking Christian Attitudes to Jews and Judaism**

The second category of foreign Christians who come to this country and are intrigued by the return of a part of the Jewish people to this country, is motivated by very different considerations. Generally, these Christians are horrified by the words and deeds of these Protestant fundamentalists, because they see how, not only Palestinians and other Arabs, but also the Jews themselves are reduced to mere pawns and marionettes in the great drama that is described in terms of a Christian scenario, in which the destruction of millions of 'unbelieving Jews' alongside Arabs and Palestinians is considered part of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

This second category of foreign Christians is deeply shocked by the fact that the mass murder of millions of Jews during the Nazi Regime took place in a part of the world that was profoundly influenced by Christianity. They see a direct link between the destruction of European Jewry and traditional negative attitudes and hostility to Jews and Judaism in the teaching, preaching and action of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches throughout the centuries, especially in Europe, both in its Western and Eastern parts.

These attitudes were characterized by the theological rejection of the Jewish people as God's people. They acknowledge that God had loved, chosen and charged this people with a special task in Old Testament times, but that God had rejected this people as it did not accept Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior but stuck to its own interpretation of the Torah, the revelation it had received from God, and remained faithful to it. The Churches saw it therefore as their task to discriminate against, to despise and persecute the Jewish people, thus creating a climate of opinion among the general population in which the hatred of Jews could flourish, and thus resistance to the Nazi regime was paralyzed, except among a courageous minority.

This second category now saw it as its task to rethink this whole Christian attitude towards the Jewish people and to learn about this people's history, its struggle for survival, its religious and cultural traditions in all their richness, about its contributions to the general community, and to find a different attitude to the Jewish people as that of contempt and hostility.

This was, however, accompanied by distinct blindness for those at whose expense the new State of Israel was established, in particular the Palestinians. In their eagerness to assume an attitude of respect toward the Jewish people and their right to freedom, security, welfare and peace, they often overlook the Palestinians, including their fellow-Christians among the Palestinians. Many Christians from Europe and America whom I encounter in this country are astonished when they hear that there

are here Palestinian Christians, some of whom even trace their origins to the very beginning of Christianity. There is in this regard an enormous ignorance and a refusal to see things as they are. This leads to very partisan attitudes to the policies of the state of Israel and to defending things that are indefensible.

It is my firm conviction that foreign Christians who have come here to learn respect and acceptance in relation to Jews and Judaism should also learn respect and acceptance in relation to Palestinians – both Muslims and Christians – and with regard to their religious tradition and present reality, both Islamic and Arab-Christian, because fairness, justice, peace, human brotherhood and sisterhood and respect for human dignity are indivisible. One cannot love one human being and despise the other. There will always be tensions between foreign and Palestinian Christians because their motivations and priorities differ, but all are called to respect the Other who crosses their paths.

It is so easy for foreign Christians to choose one party in the conflict and reject the other. Christians who come here out of concern for the origins of their faith, whether they are of the Helena or the Origen/Jerome type, tend to be pro-Palestinian, and those who come here to find a new relationship to Jews and Judaism, tend to be pro-Jewish, but I feel that both groups should strive to be pro-peace and pro-reconciliation. It means that one has to move beyond the party in the conflict one feels most comfortable with and to try to understand and appreciate the other party. And where foreign Christians are able to act as bridges between Jews and Palestinians, they should do so.

But it will be very difficult if one sees both Palestinians and Jews only as pawns and marionettes in a divine drama that is unfolding before our eyes in the Middle East. It is here that foreign Christians play an evil role.

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