

Christian/Muslim: Relation in Palestine- A Personal View

By Zoughbi Zoughbi - 1997

*Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.
-- Thomas Jefferson, 1816*

Palestinian Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. Despite their religious identity as Christian, their national identity is as part of the Arab Palestinian culture and civilization. While the small number of Palestinian Christians do not make them quantitatively significant, their presence is strongly felt qualitatively. Throughout history, Palestinian Christians have chosen to be fellow citizens in the common struggle against any kind of foreign or colonial invasions, regardless of its religious or ethnic identity. Consider the following historic points. Palestinian Christians, like Palestinian Muslims, were both victims of the 1948 war. Sixty percent of the Christians were kicked out of Palestine in 1948. Many of the 440 villages that were leveled in 1948 had a mix of Christian / Muslim inhabitants. Many churches and mosques were also destroyed in these villages. Twenty-three thousand Palestinian Christians were expelled by force in an ethnic cleansing Campaign alongside with twenty-two thousand Palestinian Muslims in Jerusalem. In the wake of the 1948 war and even since, the number of Christians have dwindled drastically.

Fifty years later, it is not strange that nowadays, as always; the Israeli government is trying to distort the image of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian struggle. Propaganda and lies have been spread regarding the Christian / Muslim relations between the P.A. and the Christian people. Such a strategy of the right-wing Israeli government, with cooperation of the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem and the coalition with the right-wing Christian groups in the United States, aims at dividing and conquering the Palestinians as well as dehumanizing them.

Palestinian Christians are often asked about the nature of the relationship among the Christians and the Muslims, and among the Palestinian Authority and the Christians. Addressing the latter, the P.A. is building a non-constitutional Moslem Country where Christians and Muslims should enjoy equal rights. The Palestinian Authority functions as a governing body and not as individuals who have different religious backgrounds. Arafat, as the elected head of this governing body, has more support than any elected president anywhere in the world (winning 88% of the vote in the 1996 election). Arafat regards all Palestinian citizens on equal terms. Moreover, he has gone the tenth extra mile by applying affirmative action (quota system) in a positive manner. Seven of the eighty-eight seats in the Legislative Council are for Palestinian Christians. This is 8% of the seats, while Christians only make up 2% of the population of the West Bank and Gaza. Similarly, the Samaritans, who number three hundred and twenty persons, have one seat in the Council. In addition, a good number of Arafat's top aides are Christians. And, for the first time in history, Christian holidays are observed, including Christmas, New Year's and Easter. These are just a few indications of the good Christian-Muslim relations within the Palestinian Authority. Another example is the current construction of a church at the site of Jacob's Well in Nablus. Under Israeli rule, the church was not allowed to be built. The Palestinian Authority, however, has not only encouraged, but has facilitated the process of the building of the church at this important religious site. This is just one of many examples of the good relationships between the Palestinian Authority and the church institutions. The same thing is found at the personal level, the

Palestinian society has served as the model of inter-religious harmony in the Arab world. An outsider visiting the Holy Land would indeed find it hard to distinguish between the Palestinian Christian and Muslim. People from both religions visit each other. Just yesterday, at my nephew's baptism, Muslim friends were present. Even the schools run by Christian churches have a majority Muslim student population. This past year at Jerusalem University, the 900 Muslim students and administration threw a Christian party for the eighteen Christian students. These are only a few of the countless examples I could share.

The closure of Jerusalem and the Bantustaning of the Palestinian areas create a lot of economic and political difficulties: the economic situation is deteriorating, the political situation is unstable and inflation is high. Erasmus said, "Horses are born, human beings are made". So we are the products of the socio-economic political situation. Living in a pressure cooker situation, no one can expect Palestinian individuals to act as angels. Yet conflicts do exist. Individuals might have conflict with each other regardless of politics, religion or class, and this is something natural in any society. I do not understand why there are voices spreading rumors about the negative relationship between Christian and Muslim Palestinians at a time when everyone knows the right-wing government in Israel is regarded as one of the worst violators of human rights. I am always reminded by grassroots organizations that it is not my Muslim brother who prevents me from going to church in Jerusalem on Sunday. It is the Israeli soldier. It is not my Muslim brother who requires an old woman to get a permit from the Israeli officials to be admitted to a Jerusalem hospital. It is Israel that makes my American wife leave every few months to get a tourist visa, and denies her citizenship, while any person who claims their great-great grandmother is a Jew can come live in any part of the Holy Land, regardless of his/her spouse or whether he or she is an observant Jew. It is Israel who makes us suffer in the hot Summer months without sufficient water to cook and clean, while Israeli settlers and citizens have running water twenty-four hours a day with their pools overflowing and their gardens blooming. These are just tiny tastes of the day to day living situation in Palestine. These are the difficulties that challenge us all, Muslims and Christians, in our self-determination and statehood.

In short, the conflict is not between Muslims and Christians; it is between Palestinians as a whole and the anti-peace government of Israel. For those who are concerned about the Christian presence in Palestine, I hope that their efforts will join our efforts to fight for social justice, political stability and the realization of the rights of all people and citizens. Martin Luther King once asked: "Where are we headed- community building or chaos?" We want to head toward community building. But this will not happen except with the consolidation of the three dimensions of the struggle- the Palestinian struggle to end occupation, the Israeli peace camp's struggle to end their role as occupiers, and the pro-justice camp and non-governmental organizations' struggle to provide an effective and honest third party arbitrator. Only with this consolidation can we gain leverage to balance the imbalance of power and force the right-wing Israeli government to succumb to the international way of resolving the Palestinian/Israeli conflict through negotiation and peace talks.

And once again, Jerusalem will not only be a model of co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis, but also an oasis of accepting each other as we are, and enjoying earthly and heavenly Jerusalem.