Christianity in Palestine: Misrepresentation and Dispossession

Timothy Seidel

*The Electronic Intifada*

A view of the Old City of Jerusalem — with both the Haram a-Sharif and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre visible — from Dominus Flevit church on the Mount of Olives (Timothy Seidel)

“You are a Christian?” a foreign tourist inquires with marked disbelief of a Palestinian tour guide in Bethlehem. “When did you convert?”

This response by foreigners, Christian or not, is unfortunately not uncommon in Palestine. Even in Bethlehem, the origin to which many trace the very roots of their Christian faith, this disbelief goes hand-in-hand with tourists’ visits to the Church of the Nativity — visits that seem to carry with them some image of a time long past with only archaeological or religious sites remaining with little consideration for the “living stones” that have continuously borne witness to this tradition for two millennia.

Many Christians from the Global North have a hard time seeing and relating to Christianity in the Arab world as living, vibrant communities of faith with rich spiritual and theological traditions. This may be partly due to a lack of understanding about the shape of Christianity in other parts of the world, but may also be partly due to the often racist and ethnocentric notions of what a Christian should look like.
Christianity in the Arab world has had a long and lively history, including in Palestine, where one still finds today communities of faith that stretch back thousands of years to the very beginnings of the church, where Arabic is spoken in liturgies and sermons, and where the church has played an integral role in the development of society, whether in terms of providing leadership in very difficult times or in pioneering valuable social services like education. Today, of the roughly 3.9 million Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, less than two percent are Christians. Of the 1.4 million Palestinians living inside Israel, meanwhile, roughly eight percent belong to Christian communities. Though small, these communities bear witness to two millennia of continuous Christian presence in the land called “holy” by much of the rest of the world.

Palestinian Christians belong to several traditional communities of faith, communities that can be grouped into four broad categories. The first are the traditions of the Eastern Orthodox churches. These would include the Greek Orthodox communities, claiming a continuous presence in the Holy Land since the times of the apostles. The second group is made up what is sometimes referred to as the “Oriental” Orthodox churches, such as the Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian Orthodox communities. A third category consists of those churches belonging to the Catholic family of churches. In addition to Roman Catholic communities, referred to in the Middle East as the “Latin” church, one finds “Eastern Catholic” or “Eastern Rite Catholic” churches. These churches, though in communion with Rome and recognizing the authority of the pope, have maintained their own distinctive liturgy and traditions. Members of such communities as Greek Catholic or Syrian Catholic outnumber the number of “Latin” Catholics in Palestine and have a long history of involvement in the Palestinian struggle for justice. Finally, there are various Protestant communities, including not only Anglican and Lutheran churches, present since the
nineteenth century, but also independent evangelical churches, including Baptist, Pentecostal, and more.

Today in Palestine, Christianity is experiencing what many would consider a crisis. This is not due to the growth of so-called Islamic fundamentalism or the persecution of “believers” by their Muslim neighbors, misrepresentations that are unfortunately used to distract from the realities of occupation. Instead, the plight of the Palestinian Christian is very much connected to that of the Palestinian Muslim in that both, whether in the Occupied Territories or inside Israeli itself, are experiencing daily injustices at the hands of oppressive and discriminatory policies imposed on them by the Israeli government.

Palestinian Christians, like their Muslim brothers and sisters, have experienced a long history of dispossession and have not been immune to Israeli policies of occupation and discrimination. If anything, they have felt more strongly the feelings of forsakenness, knowing full well that many Christians in North America and Europe support without question the state of Israel in its oppression of their people. Daily experiences of humiliation at checkpoints, of land confiscation to make way for the separation barrier, the illegal occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory, lack of mobility and access to basic services, unemployment, poverty, and no sense of hope for a better future for their children have all contributed to this growing emigration of Palestinian Christians from the historical land of Palestine.

Like their Muslim neighbors, who are prevented by checkpoints and roadblocks from making pilgrimage to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Christians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are denied basic religious freedoms, routinely prohibited from traveling very short distances to worship in one of the most holy sites in Christianity — the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City of Jerusalem, where the church commemorates Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, and resurrection from the dead.
A famous ancient mosaic in the Church of the Loaves and Fishes on the sea of Galilee (taken by Christi Hoover Seidel)

For the Palestinian Christians of Bethlehem, for example, traveling the six-mile (ten-kilometer) distance to Jerusalem’s Old City is impossible without special permission. Roughly half of Bethlehem’s residents are Christian. Church leaders estimate that over 2,000 Christians have emigrated from the Bethlehem area since September 2000, representing a decline of more than nine percent of Bethlehem’s total Christian population. [1]

Rev. Alex Awad, Palestinian pastor of the East Jerusalem Baptist Church, reminds us that “Palestinian Christians have existed in the Holy Land since the day of Pentecost and have kept the torch of Christianity burning faithfully for the past two thousand years.” The erosion of Christianity in her birthplace, he poignantly observes “is a loss for the body of Christ everywhere. Can we imagine the Holy Land devoid of the Christian presence and a church which has been a faithful witness for Christ since the day the church was born?” [2]

Unfortunately, various reportings of this phenomenon has revealed stereotypes in North America and Europe that continue to see the root socio-economic problem for Palestinian Christians as their Muslim neighbors. It is disconcerting that the portrayal of the Christian absence in Palestine, for example, is often played off as the fault of Muslims and not of the illegal Israeli occupation, as if Muslims are oppressing Christians and that this is the root of the problem for Palestinians. It is the occupation that has made life so difficult that many Christians have moved from Palestine. This continues to be a serious problem, ignored especially by “Christian” tour groups who while visiting the “Holy Land” seldom bother to even come to Bethlehem to see these ancient sites, let alone see these Christian communities and recognize their existence. These attempts to frame this conflict in such anti-Muslim ways only distracts (often intentionally) from the burden of responsibility that sits squarely on the shoulders of the state of
Israel and its intentional violation of international law and the U.S. for its 100 billion dollar financing of this structure of violence and death.

An example of this is a resolution that is currently being circulated around the U.S. House of Representatives claiming to be concerned about the plight of Palestinian Christians and their diminishing presence in Palestine. Yet this resolution makes no mention of the root causes of this conflict but instead blames Palestinians themselves for their own victimhood, grossly misrepresenting this situation and the Palestinian people.

Only recently, while the world fixes its gaze on the ongoing Israeli assault on the people of Lebanon — both Muslim and Christian — and gives little attention to Gaza and the Israeli-caused humanitarian disaster for the million and a half people living there, the Israeli military has begun uprooting ancient olive trees in Bethlehem’s Cremisan area, marking out the path of the separation barrier to be built through one of the region’s most valuable heritage sites.

Israel’s wall in the West Bank is effectively annexing a large percentage of Bethlehem’s agricultural land (Timonthy Seidel)

The Cremisan area is of significant heritage value, home to the only winery in Palestine and two monasteries. Some of the finest examples of the region’s ancient terraced landscape can be found here. The wall will carve through these terraces destroying agricultural landscapes that have survived for centuries. When the wall is completed, Beit Jala district of the Bethlehem area will have lost access to two-thirds of its land.

It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that is responsible for the expropriation of more land for the construction of this 430-mile/700-kilometer separation barrier. It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that is responsible for the expansion of illegal settlements and the creation of a “Greater Jerusalem” depopulated of its Palestinian citizens. It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that is responsible for the checkpoints that obstruct mobility, nor the demolition of
homes and other forms of collective punishment. It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that is responsible for the “one big prison” status of Gaza. It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that is responsible for this separation barrier that will become the de facto border of a “Palestinian State” composed of several isolated islands of land on roughly 40 to 50 percent of the West Bank. It is not the Palestinian Muslim population that will be responsible for, absent a viable, contiguous Palestinians state, the “reservation” life that will parallel the Native North American experience in the United States. No, it is the ongoing Israeli structure of occupation and dispossession that continues to devastate Palestinian livelihood for both Christian and Muslim alike.

At a time when the U.S. Congress is considering the plight of Palestinian Christians, they are witnessing the destruction of their community’s land, heritage and livelihood. The people of Bethlehem have been very clear in their message to the international community, “If you want to help us, stop the construction of Israel’s Wall.” [3]

Anyone who lives in this society long enough is aware of tensions that might exist between Christians and Muslims. Palestinians society like any other society in the world is dealing with its own problems. But to focus on this internal tension to the exclusion of other factors is missing the mark and emptying this issue of its context.

It is indeed hard to be Palestinian Christian these days. But it is also hard being a Palestinian Muslim. The fact of the matter is that it is hard simply being a Palestinian.

Timothy Seidel is a peace development worker with Mennonite Central Committee in the Occupied Palestinian Territories where he has lived for the past two years.