

EDITORIAL

In this issue

This issue of *Living Stones Magazine* contains some particularly eloquent and persuasive testimonies to the ongoing threat to the survival of the Christian communities in the Holy Land and to the tragic diminution of prospects for peace in the region. In a major article first published in the New York Review of Books the celebrated travel writer William Dalrymple provides us with a graphic account of the day to day pressures that are driving Christian Palestinians into exile.

This is followed by *A Voice from the Holy Land*, a written version of the moving and rhetorically powerful address given by Elias Chacour at the Living Stones Conference held in London in May of this year. In it, Abuna Chacour offers the perspective of a man who is a peace activist and educationalist extraordinary as he ponders the paradox of his own contradictory identity as a Christian, a Palestinian, an Arab, an Israeli and, above all, a human being.

Another more politically analytical but no less impressive testimony is then provided by the eminent subject of our *From the Diaspora* interview. Afif Safieh, a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem is the political mouthpiece of the Palestinian community in this country who serves as the Palestinian General Delegate both to the United Kingdom and to the Holy See. This is followed by a contribution by the chair of Living Stones, Michael Prior who provides us with another example of his own inimitable combination of scholarly insight and incisive argument. Finally in a new feature *The Pilgrim Preacher*, readers are offered the text of a sermon preached during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity last year that seeks to relate the realities of Christian life in the Holy Land to the issues of Christian ecumenism in Britain.

Living Stones Pilgrimage

Support for the Christian community in the Holy Land necessitates the return of pilgrims from Britain and elsewhere. Many Christian Palestinians are dependent upon pilgrimage and tourism for their living and all of them need practical expression of solidarity and concern during this time of extreme testing. For some time members of Living Stones have been planning a Pilgrimage for Peace and Solidarity to the Holy Land. Universal Tours, a well-known and highly professional Christian Palestinian travel agency in Jerusalem, has offered to organise the ground arrangements for such a pilgrimage by members of Living Stones from 24 April to the 2 May. The itinerary will include visits to the usual holy sites as well as meetings with Christian as well as other community leaders. Accommodation will be in East Jerusalem and Nazareth and flights on British Airways will be purchased from a travel agent in England. Cheques will be payable to the travel agents: £249 for flights and US\$476 for ground

arrangements in Jerusalem. Further details will be made available on request.

Further details may be obtained by writing to the hon. Treasurer or by e-mail via my web site at deaconduncan.com

Support for the Tour Guide Diploma Programme at Bethlehem University

In the last issue of the magazine we announced that Living Stones had decided to raise money to help Bethlehem University to train Palestinian tour guides. This programme constitutes a response to the shortage of Palestinian tour guides by aiding a programme that will help Christians, together with other Palestinians, to remain in Palestine. As a result of the appeal in our last issue we received £400, and a preached appeal to the congregation of Our Lady of Light Catholic Church, Clacton on Sea, raised a further £600. Both sums have now been sent to Bethlehem University. Four further preached appeals are planned in the near future and we invite priests, minister and local Christian leaders to promote further collections and appeals. The appeals can be made by any informed member of Living Stones but we will also try to provide visiting preachers as requested. Members may also be able to help by direct personal gifts, taking advantage of the tax concessions available for gifts to registered charities, by using good offices with corporate donors and by holding fund-raising events.

Please contact the co-ordinator or the treasurer of Living Stones if you feel that you can help in any of these ways. Apart from the necessary costs and expenses involved in the administration of this project all donations will be applied to the assistance of students at Bethlehem University.

The Pope meets the 'Living Stones' of Palestine

On Monday 10 November Pope John Paul at the Vatican received a Delegation of Palestinian Christians. The Holy Father, welcoming the delegation, asked them to convey his 'greetings and good wishes to President Yasser Arafat and to all the Palestinian people.' He expressed confidence that their visit 'would lead to a better understanding of the situation of Christians in the Palestinian territories and the significant role which they could play in promoting the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people.' The delegation then met with the Vatican's Foreign Minister His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran and presented him with maps of the Israeli "Wall of Shame," explaining the geographical and demographic implications of the wall, as well as the damage it would cause to economic life and the distribution of water resources. Later, in a public address on the 16 November, the Pope urged that the Holy Land 'needed bridges rather than walls.'

Duncan Macpherson

THE PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS

William Dalrymple

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Taybeh is a small Palestinian village on the West Bank, ten miles North West of Jerusalem.

The farmhouses that you pass on the road there, the domes of the abandoned caravanserai, the minarets of Ottoman mosques—all are built of honey-coloured limestone which changes tone according to the colour of the sky. Shepherd boys lead their flocks down steep olive slopes into the strip fields of the valleys; it could almost be Tuscany. Only the concrete phalanx of fast-expanding Israeli settlements on the hilltops remind you where you are, and bring you back to the tensions and violence that are inescapable here. With their towering cranes and half-built apartment blocks and long lines of solar panels glinting on their roofs, the settlements are surrounded by swarms of yellow bulldozers ripping through the ancient landscape. At the settlement gates sit nests of razor wire, the fortified emplacements of the Israeli army.

The first thing that you notice about Taybeh as you drive in is that the village is full of churches: it is in fact one of the last villages round here still dominated by Palestinian Christians. The second thing you see is that Taybeh has a new brewery, and that the brewery produces (as its signboard proudly proclaims) the only organic beer in the Middle East.

The brewery is the brainchild of Nadim Khoury, a small middle-aged man with an appropriately beery paunch, tight shorts and dazzlingly white socks tucked into his Nikes. He has a Boston accent and a baseball hat, both dating from the years he spent in the States, first at high school on the East Coast, then learning the business of brewing in California. He made the decision to return home to Palestine in 1993 when the Oslo accords were signed, to start what he hoped would be Palestine's answer to Sam Adams. The Israeli military authorities who had governed the West Bank had always blocked his application to open a brewery, but the Palestinian authority gave him a license within a month. By 1995 the brewery was up and running.

For the Christian Palestinian diaspora it was a good time to return. On the wave of optimism that followed Oslo, tens of thousands of middle class West Bank exiles—many of them from the Palestinian Christian business elite—sold up in the West and returned home to invest their life savings in the New Palestine. They ranged from recent graduates to Palestinian multi-millionaires who had built up fortunes in the Gulf. There are no exact figures for the amount of private money that flowed back into Palestinian areas during the Nineties but it amounted to several billion dollars, with at least \$300 million a year coming in throughout the decade.

Overnight, the landscape changed. Bethlehem, Nablus and Ramallah are all towns which host the sprawling refugee camps we know from the news reports, places whose hopelessness breeds the stream of young men willing to

become Hamas suicide bombers. But side by side with these places, featured far less frequently in the media, are well-to-do middle-class suburbs, where well-educated US and Gulf returnees have settled down in what was—at least until the outbreak of the second *intifada*—great comfort. Even now as you drive through the streets, beside pockets of desperate poverty around the camps, you still pass gleaming CD shops and art galleries, fitness clubs and cappuccino bars. In Ramallah there is even a Mercedes dealership.

'When we came back, we put in all the family savings,' says Nadim, showing me the sprawling villa he has just built beside the brewery. Over the door is a tympanum showing St George lancing the Dragon; to one side is a deep blue swimming pool: 'We took the kids out of high school in Boston and made a nice house for them here. At first things went well. But ... well ... I guess things didn't work out like what we had expected.'

Khoury says he always knew that wooing the Palestinians off Israeli beer was going to be an uphill struggle: 'People had developed a taste for this mass-produced stuff. It was always going to take time to educate them about drinking local, naturally-produced ale with no additives.' What he did not expect was the difficulties he would have from his more puritanically-minded Islamist compatriots who more or less blocked him selling alcohol in Gaza. Indeed, thanks to pressure from Hamas, Gaza is now more or less teetotal, though the Palestine Authority has never officially declared it as such.

But the problems he faced from other Palestinians was nothing like those he faced from the Israeli army once the Second Intifada broke out in 2000. His production had grown from 200 crates a week in 1995 to 1,200 crates by the end of the decade. Suddenly he found that he couldn't get his beer out of the village. The Israel Defence Force—the IDF—had blocked the roads and would not let his vans out of Taybeh. On the occasions they did, or if he managed to persuade Israeli hauliers to distribute it instead, it would still not be allowed into Nablus, Bethlehem or Ramallah, his three main markets: 'The beer would sit at the checkpoints in the sun for days,' says Khoury. 'If the IDF didn't drink or steal it themselves, it would go off in the sun: it has no preservatives. We are now down to 10 percent of what we were producing in 1999. I've laid off all our staff and would be bankrupt now if I had borrowed money. We're only here still because it was family money we used.'

Khoury gestures to his empty factory and the silent machinery: 'But there is no question of going back to Boston,' he said. 'You just have to hope. Every day I pray to St George. Its too late to give up.'

* * *

Khoury's dilemma is in some ways a parable of the problems that have always been faced by all Palestinian Christians, stuck as they are between their Muslim compatriots—with whom

they share so much linguistic, cultural and ethnic terms, but from whom they are religiously distinct—and their Israeli masters, who if they are aware of their existence at all tend to treat them just as they do other Palestinians: as security hazards and as unwelcome neighbours, to be either controlled, kept out, avoided or ignored.

The Christian community here is a very ancient one: like the Copts of Egypt, the Palestinian Christians of this area never converted to Islam at the time of the Arab conquest in the seventh century A.D, though they did in time take on their conquerors' language and learn, like their Muslim neighbours, to call their God Allah. Ethnically, they derive their genes from the many different peoples—Canaanites, Jews, Philistines, Byzantines, Bedouin Arabs, Crusaders, European traders and so on—who have passed through this region since prehistory. During the Byzantine period, when the area was almost entirely Christian, the wastes of Palestine were so densely filled with Christians monks and monasteries that, according to one chronicler, 'the desert had become a city'. Even as late as the eleventh century, Christians probably still outnumbered Muslims in Palestine: it was the eruption of the Crusades, and the backlash that followed the eventual Muslim victory, that put paid to that.

By 1922, only 26 years before the founding of Israel, Christians still made up a full 10 percent of the population of British Mandate Palestine. They were wealthier and better educated than their Muslim counterparts, owned almost all the newspapers and filled a disproportionate number of jobs in the Mandate Civil Service. While numerically they still dominated the Old City of Jerusalem, their leaders had already moved out from the narrow streets around the Holy Sepulchre to build fine villas for themselves in the West Jerusalem suburbs that now house the richest Israeli businessmen. Today, however, the Christians are on the retreat, and Taybeh is one of the last major Christian centres left in Palestine. Many are finding that they have no option but to pack their bags.

This diaspora is part of a wider exodus of Christians from all over the Middle East. For several hundred years under the capricious thumb of the Ottoman Sultan, the different faiths of the Ottoman empire lived, if not in complete harmony, then at least in a kind of pluralist equilibrium. Islam has traditionally been tolerant of religious minorities, and the relatively benign treatment of Christians and Jews under Muslim rule contrasts with the fate of Christendom's one distinct religious minority, the relentlessly ill-treated European Jews. As recently as the 17th century, Huguenot exiles escaping religious persecution in Europe wrote admiringly of the Ottoman policy of religious tolerance: as M de la Motraye put it, 'there is no country on earth where the exercise of all religions is more free and less subject to being troubled, than in Turkey'. The same broad pluralism that had gave homes to the Jews expelled by the bigoted Catholic kings from Spain and Portugal protected the Eastern Christians in their ancient homelands. A century ago, a quarter of the population of the Levant was still Christian; in Istanbul, that proportion rose to almost half.

But with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, its fringes—the Balkans, Cyprus, eastern Anatolia, the Levant—have suffered decades of bloodletting. Everywhere pluralism has been replaced with a

savage polarisation. Religious minorities have fled to places where they can be majorities, and those too few for that have abandoned the region altogether, seeking out places less heavy with history, such as America or Australia. Today the Christians are a small minority of 12m, struggling to keep afloat amid 180m non-Christians, with their numbers shrinking annually. In the past 20 years, at least 3m have left to make new lives for themselves in the West. According to the historian Professor Kamal Salibi, the Christians have simply had enough: 'There is a feeling of *fin de race* among Christians all over the Middle East,' he told me in Beirut. 'It's a feeling that 14 centuries of having all the time to be smart, to be ahead of the others, is long enough. The Arab Christians tend to be intelligent, well-qualified, highly educated people. Now they just want to go somewhere else.'

For the Palestinian Christians, their diaspora began in the *Nakba* [Catastrophe] of 1948. In the fighting that led to the creation of the State of Israel, 70 percent of the Palestinian Christians, along with around 700,000 of their Muslim compatriots, fled or were driven out of their ancestral homes into exile abroad. During the Six Day War of 1967, a second exodus took place: a further 18,000 Christian men, women and children fled their homes. Since then the Christians of the Palestinian Territories have continued to emigrate. In Ramallah 66 percent of the Christians have gone; in Bethlehem its just over 50%. Seventy two Christian families—nearly 300 people—emigrated from Bethlehem last year alone. Today Christian Palestinians makes up less than 2 percent of the population of Israel-Palestine. Every year their proportion of the population decreases as the haemorrhage of Christians is matched by the influx of Israelis. There are now said to be more Jerusalem-born Christians in Sydney than are left in Jerusalem, more Bethlehemites live in Chile than Bethlehem.

It is the same all over the West Bank. Most of the young Christians I met already had their immigration papers in with some embassy. Being on the whole middle-class professionals, they find it easier to leave, have the money and the skills to start again, and find their applications getting preferential treatment from embassies. Canada is now the current destination of choice, the US now being perceived as too Arabophobic for even Christian Arabs.

In Bethlehem, which has the largest Christian community in the area, I met a Christian cameraman who had worked with the BBC, but lost his job after Bethlehem was put under extended curfew. 'Everyone who can has plans to emigrate,' he told me. He pointed towards to the wall of new settlements encircling Bethlehem. Huge Israeli Merkava tanks were dug in under camouflage netting, their guns pointing out over Bethlehem's churches and mosques, bazaars and piazzas. 'Frankly, at the moment, you have to be crazy to live here if you have a choice.'

Either way, the people who are going are the young, the bright, the technocrats and the moderates: exactly the people both Palestine and Israel will count on in the future to bring prosperity and moderation to any future state if a peace solution is ever found. Ironically, of course, this exactly mirrors the situation over the battle lines in Israel where there is also a steady drain of liberals emigrating from the country in an attempt to escape the rival fanaticisms of the conflict. In the long term it sometimes seems as if it will just be the

fundamentalist settlers left to confront their opposite numbers in Hamas, with fewer and fewer secular moderates remaining to keep the crazies on both sides from each others throats.

This emigration matters. The Christian Arabs are a bulwark protecting the Arab World from Islamism. Since the 19th century, they have played a vital role in defining a secular Arab identity: men like Michel Aflaq, founder of the Ba'ath Party, and George Antonius who wrote *The Arab Awakening* were both Christian. Edward Said, the Arab World's most influential contemporary intellectual, is also a Palestinian Christian. If they continue to emigrate, the Arabs will find it much harder to defend themselves against radical Islamism.

There is another very good reason to lament the emigration of the Christian Arabs. Christianity is not, of course, a Western religion. It was born in Jerusalem and received its intellectual superstructure in cities such as Antioch, Constantinople and Alexandria. At the Council of Nicea, where the words of the Creed were thrashed out in 325 AD, there were more Bishops from Persia and India than from Western Europe. Those Eastern Christians who are now leaving the Middle East preserve many of the most ancient liturgies and traditions still surviving from the Early Church. Without the local Christian population, the most important and tancient shrines in the Christian world will be left as museum pieces, preserved only for the curiosity of tourists. Christianity will no longer exist in the Holy Land as living faith; and a vast vacuum will lie in the very heart of Christendom.

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The Christians have a variety of good reasons for leaving.

A few admit they are worried by the rise of militant Islam, and fear that in time their place in Palestinian society may be under threat as the Muslim Palestinians become increasingly radicalised. As recently as the early years of the twentieth century, Muslim, Jewish and Christian Palestinians would still come together, as they had done for centuries, to pray at saints shrines common to all the three faiths. One of these was the Church of St George in Beit Jala where Jews and Muslims would join their Christian neighbours to pray to the saint they knew as al-Khadr and the Jews as Elias. Today the Jews are nowhere to be seen. Muslim Palestinians still come, but fewer each year. This polarisation seems irreversible.

The biggest problem facing the Christians is simply that America is Christian too. Whatever its Eastern origins, today Christianity's centre of gravity is now firmly in the West. The remaining eastern Christians now find themselves caught between their co-religionists in the US, and their strong cultural links with their Muslim compatriots.

Nothing does more to unite the fractious Islamic world, or to turn it against its Christian minorities, than a US attack on one or other prostrate Muslim state. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are exactly the sort of adventure that the Eastern Christians have most learned to dread, and, as at the time of the Crusades, it is they who are getting it in the neck for the perceived aggression of the Christian West. So far the only Christian communities to have been directly targeted by militants in revenge for US attacks are Egyptian

Copts and Pakistani Protestants both of whom have been gunned down in Islamist attacks, sometimes while in Church. But with the continuing radicalisation of the Palestinian Muslims it is now far from inconceivable that the same could eventually happen in Palestine.

Yet for all this, the Palestinian Christians all insist that it is not their Muslim neighbours that are causing them to emigrate, so much as the brutality of the Israelis: 'I don't know one family which has left because of the Muslims.' I was told by Carol Michel, a young Palestinian Christian working in the Lutheran International Centre in Bethlehem. 'Its the Israelis that have turned Bethlehem into a big prison. We are locked in and cannot leave. Every year they grab more of our land. All I want is a normal life. I love Bethlehem—but I want to live, to be free again. *Yani* every year my father said the next year would be better. But now he's 64 and its still getting worse. I don't think anyone in the West realises how we suffer here. Our only hope is to emigrate.'

Talk to the emigrating Palestinian Christians, and they repeat the same grievances: they are leaving to escape the curfews, arrests, targeted (and sometimes untargeted) killings, the midnight searches, the house demolitions and the constant petty humiliations inflicted on them by the Israeli Occupation troops. They leave to escape the forcible expropriation of their land, the diversion of water from ancient Palestinian villages to the new Israeli settlements, the continual closure of schools and universities. Most of all they flee the lack of hope: the growing awareness that the second *intifada* has failed, that Arafat and Oslo are finished, that the Road Map looks unworkable, and the nagging fear that the US might eventually, tacitly, consent to some right wing Israel Government ethnically cleansing the remaining Palestinian population.

Since the beginning of the disastrous second *intifada*, unemployment has risen to 65 percent and everyone has accumulated debts. Increasingly, people have no money for food, and rely upon coupons distributed by the Red Cross. Even many of the middle-class find their larders bare. Things were especially bad last December, when—following a rash of suicide bombings—for six weeks the Israelis broke the curfew of the town only for an hour or two, twice a week—giving no time even for food shopping. Just before last Christmas, I spoke to my former landlady in the town, a relatively prosperous Roman Catholic, who told me over the phone that she only had water and crackers to live on until the next break in the curfew: 'For once I hoped that the Israelis wouldn't lift the curfew during Christmas,' she added. 'We don't have money to buy my kids presents.'

What really rattled the Christians in Bethlehem was the muted response of the West to the Israeli siege of the Church of the Nativity last year: 'Why did the Christians in the West not try to help us?' asks Fuad Kukaly, the Mayor of Beit Sahour, just below Bethlehem. 'We feel we have been abandoned.' Like most of his community Kukaly was profoundly depressed by the way much of the media uncritically bought the Israeli line that Muslim 'terrorists' had taken the priests hostage, when according to Palestinian priests involved in the siege, they had opted to stay with the besieged Palestinians they had grown up with, and several of whom were their own Christian parishioners. 'Western

Christians have a duty to secure our future,' says Kukaly. 'This is the Holy Land, the land of the Nativity. Sometimes we think the Western Christians have simply forgotten their brothers in the East. This is a time of crisis: if they do nothing to help us, we may not be able to survive here much longer.'

While the siege was going on, Israeli troops occupied Bethlehem, and made their presence felt. Much damage was done. New Russian immigrants in the IDF, many of them fresh from the war in Chechniya, behaved particularly brutally. One of the worst cases of vandalism was a new arts and conference centre run by the Lutheran Church. The Pastor, the Revd. Mitri Raheb, took me around showing how Israeli troops had smashed up the new \$2m centre, blowing up workshops, shattering windows and fax machines, shooting up the photocopiers and bringing down ceilings with explosive charges in an oddly pointless bout of thuggery.

The Pastor described to me how on the 5th of April 2002 drunken Russian IDF soldiers held him at gunpoint for six hours making racist remarks about how ugly and filthy Arabs were, while they smashed up the Centre he had spent five years creating: 'They destroyed everything. I told them this was church property and asked them why they were doing this. They said, 'You Christians are siding with the Muslims and you will pay the price. If you were wise you would see that.' I replied, 'the real wise man transforms his enemy into neighbour, but you are transforming a neighbour into an enemy.' They just told me to shut up and pointed their guns at me. We complained to the IDF, and produced evidence that they had caused over half a million dollars of damage; but of course nothing happened. There was no compensation. There never is.'

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Ten years ago, when I travelled around the West Bank Palestinian Christians for my book, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* [Holt, 1997], it was difficult to find anything up to date written on the community, its history and its current decline. Today that situation is very different.

Much the best book is Charles Sennott's study *The Body and the Blood: The Middle East's Vanishing Christians and the Possibility for Peace* [Public Affairs; ISBN: 1586481657]. Sennot, a prize-winning correspondent for the *Boston Globe* is a skilled, wise and perceptive reporter with an unusually observant eye for small telling details: he notices for example how Palestinian Christian girls automatically put their pendant crosses away beneath their blouses when they pass through Muslim areas of Palestinian towns, and the fact they will not pass through such areas at all if they are wearing short-sleeves or miniskirts. His research is solid and reliable, and above all he is balanced and fair-minded: as a Boston Catholic married to a Jewish girl he has an empathy with both sides of the divide, and unusually for books which stress the plight of the Palestinians, it has received enthusiastic reviews in Israel itself.

Sennot emphasises how few people outside the Middle East are even aware of the existence of Arab Christians: he points out that during Pope John Paul II's historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land in March 2000, the indigenous

Christians were overlooked, pushed aside and forgotten. He also stresses how imminent is the final collapse of Palestinian Christian society: already, he says, in one Jerusalem parish, there are no longer enough Christian men left to carry the coffin at funerals.

If there is one weakness in Sennott's book it is his grasp of history, which is at times a little shaky. Luckily, there have recently been a rash of excellent surveys of Palestinian Christian history. Three of the best are edited by Anthony O'Mahony who has published successively *The Christian Heritage of the Holy Land* (Scorpion Cavendish, 1995) *Palestinian Christians: Religion, Politics and Society in the Holy Land* (Melisende, 1999) and most recently *The Christian Communities of Jerusalem* (University of Wales Press, 2003). Another excellent collection of historical essays can be found in *Christians in the Holy Land*, edited by Michael Prior (World of Islam Festival Trust, 1994.)

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It's only seven p.m but already there is Algerian Rai booming at top volume in the Bethlehem Radio Net Café. The remix drowns out Eminem on MTV flashing from the widescreen over the bar. Tripping over the floor some forty Palestinian Christian girls in tight T shirts—all firm olive midriffs, fashionable flares and beautifully braided hair—have taken to the floor and are dancing the *dabkeh* with hands raised as their boyfriends look on.

There could be few worse places in Palestine to try and conduct an interview. But this is Reem Abu-Aitah's favourite spot in Bethlehem, the place which she says most reminds her of normal life, and she insists that we struggle on over the music: 'Just look at them,' she says. 'They've been under curfew for weeks now and this is their first opportunity to have a graduation party. It only takes one day – just one day—without the Israelis locking us up and things get back to normal. Then she adds after a pause: 'Well, most things...'

There are good reasons for Reem's hesitation. Bethlehem is now completely encircled with new Israeli settlements and the new Security Wall has led to the confiscation of most of Bethlehem's remaining agricultural land. And while the Israeli settlers have free movement over the West Bank, all the Palestinians are prevented by the IDF from leaving their towns. Like many Palestinian business people, Reem is now on the verge of bankruptcy.

It never looked like it would end this way. In 1998 after ten years out of Palestine, Reem sold up her computer business in Birmingham, and set one up in Bethlehem: 'It was a great place. We did it up. It looked really good: a nice open place you could walk around and choose your laptops and desktops. We'd just gone into profit when Sharon went to Al Aqsa...'

Within ten days our shop was caught in the crossfire between Bethlehem and [the Israeli settlement of] Gilo. We had to lie on the floor for hours watching the tracer shooting past. It was horrible. Bullets were hitting the walls... One of our neighbours was killed, just sitting in her house. Since then we have barely sold a single computer. No one has the cash for a new laptop, even if we could get them through the checkpoints. Occasionally we get calls from our suppliers

in Tel Aviv and they're saying 'do you want an order?' They don't seem to understand that we can't even get out of our houses to go to the office without the Israeli army shooting us. Last month the shop was only open for three days. The rest was curfew. Many times I think of emigrating again. But the business keeps me here. We have invested everything. What can we do?'

Many others, however, have made a conscious decision to remain. Marwan Tarazi is one of the leading Palestinian software designers: he helped design Arabic MS DOS. A Greek Orthodox Christian, five years ago he returned home from an extended spell in Canada intent on rebuilding his country. 'I earn about a quarter of what I used to in Canada, and of course it's irritating not being able to go windsurfing and mountain biking like I used to in Montreal,' he says. 'But my duty is here.'

Marwan's current project is developing software for Bir Zeit university to allow the courses to be taught over the net so that students can continue studying under closure: 'Education is the most important thing in the world: it's the building block of any nation. You can have all the curfews in the world, but if you have a well-educated people, you have the basis for a developed country. The Israelis have closed down the schools and whole generations of kids are coming out with compromised educations. It's going to have a catastrophic effect. But thanks to this programme we already have Ramallah kids bedding down in the net cafes doing their courses while the IDF rampage outside. Its working.'

Marwan shrugs his shoulders: 'You've got to understand we are living in a horror show here. Its very easy to go nuts. You just have to keep believing in the future. You have to dream. Its when you stop dreaming that you die ...'

A VOICE FROM THE HOLY LAND

Elias Chacour

Father Elias Chacour gave this paper at the Living Stones Conference at the Friends Meeting House, 28 May 2003. Father Chacour is founder and President of the College of Mar Elias in Ibillin in Galilee. He is also Vice President of Sabeel and provided the original inspiration for the setting up of Living Stones.

It is a great honour to be with you and I am so thrilled to see that so many among you have been there [the Holy Land] and know some of the story and sympathised and identify with what we do, and that's a great encouragement.

I think you have continued this sympathy, this solidarity, in mobilising thousands if not hundreds of thousands of your citizens before the war in Iraq to say no to the war. For us this was the beautiful face of the UK. We knew it existed, and we wanted to see it before the war. In doing so, I think you were protesting against the war, but you were doing something far more important. You were saying to all the Middle East that this war is not a Christian war. And Christians cannot justify such a war. And in doing so I think you rejected those who easily used the term 'crusades' to go to Iraq. In doing so you have really saved fifteen million Arab Christians in the Middle East. Otherwise, without your protests, without your courage, without expression of your faith, we would have been identified with these crusaders, and we are not.

In the time of the historic Crusades, Christians in the Middle East and in Palestine allied together with Jews and Muslims, to get rid of the Crusaders because they were anything but representing Christ for us—because Christ and violence cannot go together. After our compatriot Jesus we developed a conviction that there is no such thing as a 'just war'. There are just wars. And in a war there is no winner and loser, there are always two losers, one more than the other.

Well, that's why I am very honoured to be with you this evening and to say, in a kind of joke, that I feel myself like a lion in a den of Daniels! So thank you for your courage, thank you for your humility, and also for your faith. It is important to know that we have some solidarity, we Christians,

and we don't need to justify war with religious arguments.

Well, I would allow myself to introduce myself as I normally do, so as to put you in front of the reality in the Middle East. I want to do this because it is so easy in such a forum to be present and to try to throw stones at the Jews in Israel or to throw bomb on the Palestinians in the West Bank—to accuse one side and to legitimise the other side. I am not here to accuse anybody. I am here to invite you to realise how complicated the situation is.

I am a Palestinian, a proud Palestinian, a very proud Palestinian. For you, I don't think I need to say I have no bombs. In America I tell them I have no bombs, 'Come and check. I am not a terrorist, I am one of the terrorised.' Born terrorised, with what happened to myself, to my family, to my village, to my people, to my nation, I have been condemned to become the Jews of the Jews. I am a Palestinian Arab; my mother language is really very easy to learn—the Arabic language. Why do you laugh? If you don't believe me, come back with me after tomorrow: you will see that in Palestine even young children speak Arabic. If they do so, why can't you? They are no more intelligent than you!

I am Palestinian, Arab and Christian, and you are all informed here that it is normal, but not everyone accepts for a Palestinian to be a Christian, because a Palestinian is not a human being in the media. A Palestinian is a terrorist, is bloodthirsty, inclined to violence. A Palestinian is exactly what a Jew was in the early forties. He was not a human being, he was not a man, a woman, a boy, a girl—he was 'a dirty Jew.' We needed to open the concentration camps to realise that those who were killed were not dirty, they were the victim of dirt somewhere else. But it was too late, and it is becoming too late for the Palestinians. But thank God that you are here and thank God that you believe that you can make a difference. And shout loud and clear, 'There is no dirty nation! There is no terrorist nation!'

I am a Palestinian Arab Christian. My father was Christian but I was not born Christian, thank God. I will tell you when I was converted to Christianity.

I am a Palestinian Arab Christian, and I am also, as strongly, a citizen of the State of Israel. Some consider that a very special complication. I try to take these different facets of my identity as a new challenge to create unity within diversity, despite all the odds. I assert this despite the fact that our life has been turned to funeral processions on both sides. I assert this despite the fact that hatred is now being nurtured on both sides so strongly.

You need to be insane to legitimise suicide bombers. You need to be insane to say that this is something good, something not criminal, that this is something noble. But you have to be naïve if you stop there, and ignore the hidden terror that pushes young people to despair so much that they think it is better for to die than to continue living in humiliation—with no dignity, no self-esteem, no future, with nothing at all. And *there* is the hidden terror that *has to be uprooted*.

This is because our children were never born with two stones in their hands. They were never born to love to die at that early age. They are ambitious. They like music. They like to dance. They like to learn. They like to study. They like to dream about the future. But instead they ask questions about the future. ‘Tomorrow will we be able to meet together? Tomorrow will we have water to drink? Tomorrow, will we be able to go to collect our olives—our figs? Will we be able to work in our fields? Tomorrow will we wake up to find father still at home—or will he be taken somewhere, in prison? Tomorrow how many of our friends will be dead—killed. Hunted? And this contagion, fortunately or unfortunately, has spread. No one is safe. The Jews in Israel are deadly scared to go outside, to go on public transportation or in public places. They don’t know when a suicide bomber will come and say ‘Hey, it’s better for me to die than to live—but I will kill you with me.’

And fear is a general phenomenon now, encouraged by world leaders, world leaders who want to smoke people out, to suffocate people, in their prisons, in their grottos, to flush people down. How much do we feel the need for someone to come and say, ‘Fear not. Fear not, I give you peace—my peace, the peace from heaven.’ This is the only thing we need now. Peace that comprises acceptance of the other as being different—I will come back to that.

So I take these four facets of my identity as a new challenge, try to put some kind of order into what I am.

What am I first? A citizen of Israel? It can’t be, because I have a serious problem with the State of Israel. Israel is an entity fifty-four years old—well I am sixty-five years old, I am ten years older than Israel. And I was not born in Israel—it is Israel that was born in me. It is Israel that was born in my country, it is my country that was changed and became largely, the country of Israel. I could not be first of all an Israeli citizen.

I became a citizen of Israel at the age of eight years, when all my people, the Palestinians, were deported, evicted—fled. They were ethnically cleansed. And a very few of them were able to stay in the territory of Palestine, which became Israel. And by the time going, I became a citizen of Israel like some others. And now there are one million two hundred thousand Palestinian Arabs who became citizens of the State of Israel. I wish I did not need to say that I am a second class citizen. I wish I could hide the number of my identity card

being 02. My Jewish friend is 01. I don’t have anything against 02, provided we are all 02s. And I don’t object to be 01—why not? But all the time we are 01 and 02, we risk being reduced to zeros, and democracy becomes something questionable.

What am I first—a Palestinian? I was born into a Palestinian family and that’s all—and I cannot give priority to my Palestinian entity or my Arab nationality because I was born in a Palestinian Arab family. I could have been born in any other family that has nothing to do with Palestine or with Arabs.

What remains—that I am a Christian. It was a very big objection in my conscience—I could not have been born Christian! And when I thought seriously, I discovered that I was not born a Christian. Thank God. What about you, here? Were you born Christians? Please tell me, how did you do that? Or were you like me—I was born a baby. And only a baby, with a birth certificate created in the image of the likeness of God. Not more, but not less either. And discovering this reality, I look at the soldier who destroyed my father’s house, and a think, goodness, he was born also a baby in the image of the likeness of God. I look at the army that is now killing so many people and being killed by those people, and I think: these are born babies in the image of the likeness of God—what have we done to each other? And I remember the first crime, the first crime ever committed in the Bible: Cain killing his brother Abel. Why? Because they did not engage in dialogue. They did not speak to each other. I remember the two first questions that the Creator asked humanity—the first man: ‘Where are you?’ and he was hiding. He had done something not very nice. And the second question: ‘Where is your brother? What have you done to your brother?’ We need to change the answer, ladies and gentlemen, and to say no more ‘Am I my brother’s custodian?’ We need to affirm that ‘Yes! I am my brother’s custodian! What happens to me, a UK citizen is what happens to a Palestinian—What happened in Uruguay, what happens in Tanzania, in America, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, happens to me—these are my children!’

This is what my compatriot Jesus brought that is absolutely new: that as human beings, we are all called to become adopted children of God. Even you, British people! So that is who I am. As a Christian—I became a Christian not long ago—I always blame the Swiss for giving us these new watches you know—they have given us a new understanding of time, minutes, seconds, hours and so on—it is too much. For us Palestinians, we still believe that one thousand years are like one day before the Lord. So tell me, what are two thousand years? It is the day before yesterday that He was hanging around with our boys and girls in Galilee, watching everything we do, everything we live, everything we have, from wedding to funeral, from banquets to poverty, from birds to clouds to trees. And he took all of that and made of them the parables of the kingdom of heaven.

For a Palestinian Christian to sit under an olive tree he cannot forget and he cannot remember. Jesus might have sat down here! Our olive trees are very often older than two thousand years old. When we look at our fig trees, we remember him saying: this is a fruitful fig trees, and that is a barren fig tree, like human beings can become if they don’t do good. He is ever present there—that’s why we Palestinians are very bad

theologians— we don't like theology, we don't like philosophy, because we have a story to tell. We Palestinian Christians are storytellers. We have something absolutely unique to say to the world: we have an empty tomb—can you imagine—and we have a risen man. And we cannot stop telling the story.

Two thousand years ago we became Christians, and we are still witnessing God's compassion and love, as much as we can in that part of the world. And I must remind you that nothing whatsoever started in Rome or Athens or in Constantinople or in Geneva; everything started over there, in Galilee, and the Pope goes there to kneel down and ask God's blessing, and make pilgrimage. We go to Rome to visit the arts and the beautiful things that are there. So the Holy Land is in that part of the world that is called Palestine-Israel and we are trying our utmost to witness the presence of Christ.

Presently, the Christians in the Holy Land are a very small minority: 147,000 Palestinian Christians. We represent 25 percent of Palestinian Christianity. The others? You can find them in the refugee camps with their Muslim brothers and sisters, you find them in exile or in self-exile, and the biggest threat against the Christian presence in the Holy Land is the ongoing massive emigration. To give you an example, in 1948, Jerusalem was 50 percent Christians, now all of greater Jerusalem has between 5 and 7 thousand Christians, that is all. Bethlehem 25 years ago had over 60 percent Christians, now 14 percent Christians. And this catastrophe is continuing all over Galilee, we need really some kind of solidarity to convince our Christians to remain in their homes, in the villages, in their fields. And this solidarity should not be first of all and above everything, money and weapons. That's what we hear and that's what we see imported from the west. We don't want money and weapons. We want friendship. We want solidarity. We want you to say the truth, to tell the story. And if you decide to take sides, because of your past history with the Jews in Europe, take sides. It's excellent, if you sympathise with the Jews why don't you take the side of the Jews, support them, love them, share with them, provided this sharing this friendship to the Jews does not mean automatic enmity against the Palestinians.

And since many of you have been in Israel, have been in Palestine—I see the Palestinian flag here—if you have decided to take our side for having been there, for experiencing the sufferings of Palestinians, for having visited the refugee camps, and you decided to take our side—my goodness, we needed you to be on our side. Take our side! For once you will be on the right side! But, on behalf of Palestinian children, I want to tell you that if taking our side would mean you automatically become one-sided, for us against the others, *we do not need your friendship*.

Because, left to us alone, we Jews and Palestinians have been brutal enough, violent enough, to kill so many on both sides. We have made so many martyrs that are called 'terrorists' on the other side—we have made enough widows, orphans and handicapped people, we do not need your help to make more tragedy. We need you, if you have the courage, to take our side in order to help us understand those on the other side of the conflict. We need one more common friend—we don't need one more enemy.

I hesitate to say what we are doing together with our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel, for fear of confusing you.

And if you would generalise that then what the hell is going wrong there? Why are you killing each other? The situation is a little bit complicated. Inside Israel there is this small Palestinian Arab minority, Muslim and Christians, one million two hundred thousands, who are citizens of the State of Israel—not full citizens, but citizens—and we are struggling to have full citizenship. We thought we had it till Barak came to the government and ordered police to open fire on Israeli citizens, killing thirteen persons in two days. One of these was one of my students, Aseel Asleh, whose picture you saw in the movie.

Since then we are treated as being inhabitants of the country. We are not simple inhabitants by accident! We are the original inhabitants of Palestine, and will never accept anything else but full-citizenship because we say to our Jewish friends: 'We do not tolerate you in Palestine.' The policy of tolerance is the worst you can practice towards anybody. The infamous Hitler began by tolerating the Jews. He never accepted them. And we tell the Jews: 'We accept you, in our country even our homes, but we will never be happy with anything but full acceptance; we don't want to be just tolerated'.

The Palestinians in Israel are citizens of the State of Israel. Their status is absolutely different from that in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—in these territories that are under occupation. These territories are destined to become the free liberated Palestine, hopefully soon. We don't know when, but they have to be the independent Palestine—these three million Palestinians not only are not citizens of Israel, they don't want to be citizens of Israel, they do not enjoy any kind of human rights. Oh, what do I say? They enjoy one human right, left free for them to do: to make children. And they make many, many children, healthy, smart, intelligent: but with no future. If we only imagine the Gaza Strip, with its almost one million three hundred thousand people of whom one million are refugees. For fifty five years they were cornered in this part of the desert of Sinai with no possibility to work, no possibility to build their houses, no possibility to return to their homes that are forty or fifty kilometres away. And they make children: first, second, third, fifth, sixth generation, living in complete deprivation while, seeing on TV—or without TV, just across the borders—their old villages and towns occupied by innocent Jews. And the Palestinian children ask, 'Why are we in the refugee camps? What have we done to deserve that? While these children on the other side of the barbed wire are so happy, have everything, go to school, have swimming pools, everything you can imagine—and we are deprived of everything?'

Either they don't have the answer, or when they have an answer, it is a traumatising answer: they cannot say that is the holocaust and try to explain everything to the children. They say, 'The Jews came, made us depart us and took our homes', it is the easiest way to say it. And you can imagine, if you were a Palestinian mother or father, what your children would think, would feel, would decide to do.

We hope, and we pray, that soon the roots of violence in the Middle East shall be destroyed. And the only root of violence is the occupation. This is because, no matter what, you cannot put a human being in a cage and expect them to be happy. And you cannot perpetuate the occupation and hope for peace and for security. If you don't want to go with the normal modern logic, go with the logic of the prophets

who repeatedly said, 'If you want peace and security, you have to implement justice and integrity'. Otherwise you will never be able to enjoy neither peace nor security.

And this is what is really the fact in Israel now. We hurry to condemn the phenomenon of terror, the phenomenon of violence. We don't identify the causes. The situation is somehow different inside Israel. Sometimes I am ashamed to say that, even as a not-full-citizen of Israel, I enjoy freedom of expression more than, not the refugees in the Arab countries, but more than any Arab in any Arab country. This is because, there is no freedom of expression at all. And that's very sad. You cannot compare my deprivation, being in a so-called democratic country, with countries that have no democracy whatsoever. I would rather compare myself, as a small Arab community inside Israel with the big Jewish majority, with the small Jewish minority inside the USA with the big non-Jewish majority. In America, if you dare speak of the Jewish minority, you will immediately be accused of being anti-Semite, if not more than that—surely more than that! You are not allowed to treat Jews in America as being a minority. You treat the Jews as being a community—the Jewish community, and that's fair enough; they are a small community inside the big community. And this is what we are working to implement: to get away from this concept of majority-minority. We developed within Israel this mentality of minority so that whenever we ask for our rights as Arabs we consider that as a favour not as a right. And when they give us some of our rights, they consider that a condescension, not as basic rights. And this has to change.

Inside Israel, we do not live as each one being on an island. We have relations with our Jewish neighbours, we have exchanges between students, between children in the schools. At Mar Elias Educational Institution, I employ Jewish teachers, men and women. It's a large school—the largest in Israel—with over 3,500 students. The majority is Muslim—boys and girls. The girls that have their heads covered because they want to show that they are religious Muslims. That is their right; other girls have no head cover—and some others, have even no head and I have to fix their heads on their shoulders ... ! And we have 28 Jewish men and women working for us as teachers. They do not teach mathematics and electronics, they teach physical education, tailoring, fashion; they are exactly like our teachers, there is no difference whatsoever.

We have tensions sometimes. When our student was murdered by the army, the next day we organised a kind of mourning session, because the students were so shocked, so broken. Many of the Jewish teachers telephoned me and asked, 'Should we come tomorrow or not?' I said, 'why not?' They said: 'Aseel was killed, and what will the students do to us?' I said, 'If you don't come tomorrow, you'd better never come back. It's tomorrow or never!' They all were present. They cried, we cried. When the famous Jewish terrorist massacred twenty Muslims who were prostrating in prayer worshipping the God of Abraham in the midst of Hebron, we wrote letter of solidarity with the families and we wrote protests to the Israeli government. Then a few weeks later, a Palestinian brother—we are all brothers there even if we don't have any relationship—came to Tel Aviv, blew himself up in the main street killing sixteen Jews and injuring eighty-six others. We wrote letters of solidarity to the Prime Minister,

to the Minister of Education, to the families on both sides, and some of my students came and said, 'Fr Chacour, what can we do now?'. I said, 'We have done everything, we wrote letters, what can we do more?' They said, 'No, that's not enough! You look like becoming American! Americans, when they are not happy, they write a letter to their senator and then they go having a banquet in the restaurant as if they have done everything, solved everything! We cannot proceed like that'. I said, 'What do you want to do?'

One of the students—he was not a Christian, he was a good human being, a Muslim, he said, 'I am ready to donate blood, for the injured Jews'. Another student said 'I am also ready to give blood'.

'So, what do you expect from me, a priest—to say no?'

I took my telephone, called the Ramban Hospital in Haifa, it's a Jewish hospital: 'Please, send us nurses: our students would like to donate blood for the injured in Tel Aviv'.

The next day, we had three ambulances, four other cars, with fifteen Jewish nurses coming to pump our blood. I was really scared that if ten or fifteen students would come to give blood that would become something ridiculous. We had three hundred and fifty students above eighteen years old and able to decide for themselves: our of the three hundred and fifty, three hundred students donated blood, for injured Jews in Tel Aviv. That same evening, I saw on the Israeli TV: 'Today I have hope back again because Palestinian blood is flowing into Jewish veins to restore life where life was supposed to be suppressed'.

God does not delight in killing and in violence. One of our students in the fifth grade, he is nine years old, only last month, thought he would like to write a letter to the leaders of this world. And he had in mind, sorry to say, Bush and Blair, and Sharon. He put their three names. He said: 'Dear Leaders, I am a young child, a Palestinian child, nine years old. I just learned to write and to read. May I remind you that God has given us a heart, a small heart, not only to pump blood but to radiate compassion, love, forgiveness, help, and so on. It seems that your hearts only pump blood, from what we see on our TV screens. I will pray for you.' And he signed his name.

And in that school we try, despite everything, and because of all the odds, the violence that's raging over there, despite all the absence of tolerance even, we believe that peace can be built from early childhood. To sign 'peace' as they did on the lawn of the White House, between big leaders—it might be signing peace on papers, but reducing people into pieces, as you might say in the Middle East. We want to start very early, that's why we did everything we could to develop a model school where Palestinian Christians, Muslims, Druze and Jewish students are together, as well as teachers. And I am happy to end with I think the most exciting news I could ever hope for: only three days ago, we received the informal acceptance of Israel that we open the first Arab Christian University. We'll do it, we'll do it! And this University will not be for Palestinians, it will not be for Jews or Muslims—it will be for all those who were born babies in the image of the likeness of God. We have the two major objects needed for a university: students and faculty. We hope that soon you will hear better news: not only that the university was agreed, but that the university is running.

Thank you so much.

FROM THE DIASPORA

Duncan Macpherson interviews Mr Afif Safieh

In this contribution to our series of interviews with Palestinian Christians living in exile in Britain Mr Afif Safieh, the Palestinian General Delegate to the United Kingdom and to the Holy See, answers questions about his life and reflects upon his experiences.

**Can you tell us something of your experience of being a Christian in the Holy Land? What were your impressions concerning the relations between the different Christian denominations—both with each other and with the majority Jewish and Muslim communities?*

I was born in 1950, two years after the Naqba of 1948. My parents used to say jokingly that I was the consolation after the catastrophe. I have always been proud of my Christian background. My mother was a leading member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and my father, as a member of the Jerusalem Parliament, was a representative of the Christian community. In 1964 he was a founding father of the PLO. Our family was part of the liberal section of Christian opinion. For example we did not sympathise with the foolish opposition of some Arab Christians to the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, over the question of the collective guilt of the Jews for the crucifixion. On the question of relations with other faiths, our relations with the Muslims were excellent. We had after all shared a common tragedy. At school, the College des Frères in Jerusalem, fifty per cent of my classmates were Muslim. As for relationships with Jews, there were no Jewish friends or acquaintances because we lived in geographical isolation from them. On inter-Christian relationships, there were no problems between the faithful of the different churches but with their clergy it was a different matter. The Greek clergy too often had problematic relations with their own Arab faithful. In our Latin Church it was different, the controlling expatriate Italian clergy were generally very sympathetic to us and in 1988 Michel Sabbagh became the first Palestinian patriarch.

**Were there any particular advantages—or disadvantages—attached to membership of the Latin Catholic community?*

There were advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage was that our Church was centralised and universal so that although our numbers were shrinking we were nevertheless part of a worldwide Church. The Vatican deployed a protective umbrella over us. That was a major asset. The disadvantage lay in the indifference or ignorance of so many of our fellow-Catholics over our fate—but then that was true of the other churches too.

**Can you share any of your early memories of life in the Holy Land prior to your leaving it?*

Jerusalem was a unique place, full of the sounds of church bells mingling with the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. We were blessed and plagued by so much history, mythology and theology. We suffered also as a result of competing

territorial ambition. I had a happy childhood. When I go back to Jerusalem my return always brings back a sense of mixed joy and sadness. Jerusalem is the unhappiest place on earth. My parents had their memories in West Jerusalem and in East Jerusalem we were in a besieged location plunging into decline. Today it is suffocated by checkpoints at Kalandia, Tantur and Abu Dis. Suffocation is intended to drive us out. The archives show that my own family is one of the oldest in Jerusalem. Today only my sister is still in Jerusalem. The centre of gravity of our family is now in Brazil.

**What were the circumstances of your leaving the Holy Land?*

My father used to say, 'In 1948 we lost our homeland and in 1967 we lost our children.' My bother and I became non-existent. We were both studying in Europe during the 1967 war and were denied the right to return. We applied for family reunification in 1994 but the request was denied. Protests from our many friends were met by the same standard reply that only minors and spouses could be given this consideration. My mother apparently ranked only as a distant relative! Today I go back two or three times a year as a tourist with a Belgian passport—not as native-born Jerusalemite.

**When and how did you develop an interest in Palestinian nationalism?*

Politics was a necessary evil. Politics after all had determined my life. I had been born into a political family and during my studies in Louvain and Paris I became involved in the politics of the student movement. I was president of the General Union of Palestinian Students in Belgium between 1969 and 1971 and then president of the French branch in 1974 to 75. In 1976 I was asked to join the European office of the PLO in Geneva and I remained there until 1978 when I served as a staff member in President Arafat's office in Beirut.

**Did your Christian background affect your role in the Palestinian movement in any way?*

I think that it enabled me to see the Palestinian movement in a global perspective.

I suppose that I might have gained such a global perspective from the neo-Marxism current in the seventies but my radicalism was always non-Marxist. My Catholic identity also helped when I had my first meetings with Cardinal Silvestrini and with then with the Pope John Paul in 1980. These meetings led to the meeting between the Holy Father and Yasser Arafat in 1982. In 1995 I became the first Palestinian diplomat to be accredited to the Holy See. I was also appointed to the Board of Trustees of Bethlehem University.

**What future do you see for the Christian Palestinian communities in the Holy Land?*

Their future is totally connected with the success of the peace process. As you know, the Palestinian Christian communities are shrinking as a result of a series of blows.

The first blow was in 1948 when so many of them fled were driven out from Haifa, Lod and Jaffa etc. The next blow was the war of 1967, which produced still more exiles. Today Christians are 10 percent of the Palestinian people globally but in Palestine itself they constitute a mere 2 percent. This is partly a result of their being better educated. Education, with greater facility in European languages, makes it easier for the Christian Palestinians to integrate in their new home societies. They also have a lower birth rate related to their average higher economic status. The denial of permission for the reunification of my own family prevented four more Palestinian Christians from returning. It is sad that the Christian churches have not been more assertive over cases like mine. Of course, I have a political profile but those who do not have such a profile are treated in exactly the same way.

**In the light of current events how realistic are hopes for a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute?*

We are living in bleak moments. Peace-plans can only be successful through a decisive intervention by the third parties. Everybody now knows the conditions for a desirable peace. The solution cannot be left to the regional players. Israel will continually be tempted to dictate a diplomatic outcome that will reflect the unchallenged position of Israeli and America in the region. This unchallenged position is the combined consequence of American alignment on Israeli preferences, Russian decline, European abdication, and Arab impotence. Peace is too important to be left to the Israelis. Peace cannot be based upon a formula half way between Labour and Likud. What is needed is an elegantly imposed solution by the world community. This will necessitate a challenge to American absolutism in the area. Unfortunately Washington is dominated by an unholy alliance between neo-conservatives, mainly Jewish intellectuals with Likud inclinations, together with Christian fundamentalists with their theological delirium. Some twenty years ago it was suggested that we should have a dialogue with Christian fundamentalist. I was among those who opposed this proposal on the grounds that there could be no dialogue with anti-Semitism. It seems, in that respect, we were more choosy than the pro-Israeli lobby which had no such problem.

**Do you agree with the suggestion that Israeli intransigence will make the two-state solution less practicable?*

I do not believe that Sharon wants there to be a viable Palestinian state. But if a two-state solution fails I do not believe that a one-state solution will follow. An Apartheid solution might follow with a state for Israelis and a non-state for Palestinians. The South African apartheid state worked for decades in spite of there being a black majority. I am not seduced by the idea of a one-state solution. In the sixties we thought—over optimistically—that we were going to be victorious and we thought that we were being magnanimous in offering the Israelis a democratic unitary state. Today the

same idea stems from a sort of resignation that the two-state solution is no longer possible because of the huge settlement building. The only road to such a utopian solution now would be if Israel were defeated militarily or if the Israelis were to be suddenly converted to the idea. Much more likely than any ideal one-state solution is a series of 'Red Indian'-style reservations for Palestinians in and around the state of Israel.

**How do you see the situation for the Christian communities in the Holy Land and what role can they contribute in bringing about a better future?*

Internationally Christian individuals and Christian bodies engage in diplomacy on behalf of the Palestinians with some great results. Domestically they have played a great role in the areas of health and education. Their presence constitutes a witness to events that is embarrassing for the Israelis. It can awaken the western as well as the wider international community to become more concerned and interventionist. On the other hand the absence of a solution could mean the total extinction of the Christian presence and the consequent loss to both Palestine and the world. This would mean the impoverishment of Palestinian culture and the loss of a Christian Palestinian interlocutor for the Christian world.

**As the Palestinian representative to the Holy See, what do you think that Christians worldwide can do to help in bringing about a just settlement to the conflict?*

The Christian world is unaware of its potential influence and power. At present it has insignificant influence when compared with the Israeli lobby. Today Christians must be more assertive if only because of the enormity of the issues at stake. Jerusalem could become a forum for the dialogue between religions and civilisations instead of a focus for the clash of religions and civilisations. As Pope John Paul has pointed out, a solution to the conflict must respect the rights of three religions and two peoples. I do not believe that Israeli domination and Jewish hegemony are acceptable. On the contrary this has poisoned relations and Israeli intransigence has served to inflame extremism. I am proud of the position of the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury over the war on Iraq. Had they not taken this stand it would have reinforced the notion that this was a war between Christianity and Islam. The Pope did deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts for peace and for his opposition to a war whose reverberations we will have to live with for many years to come. The US and its remaining supporters had the choice of being loved or feared throughout the world—of crushing Iraq militarily or disciplining Israel diplomatically. We know what choice they made. As to the future, history is still undecided and we must all help history to make its choices. In the Middle East the political challenge and the moral dilemma are as follows: either there is one people too many, the Palestinians, or there is missing state that needs to be created. Help history to make the right choice!

THE HOLY LAND AND THE CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES

Michael Prior, CM

This paper was delivered at the conference, ‘The Holy Land and the Challenge to the Churches’, co-sponsored by Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust, Friends of Sabeel, UK, Elijah Trust, and Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, Friends House, London, 28 June 2003.

In addition to being one of the most explosive issues in international affairs the Palestinian-Israeli conflict constitutes for the Christian Churches one of the most significant moral problems of our age. The conflict began when, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Theodor Herzl concluded that the only way in which Jews could live in dignity was in a separate nation state. European antisemitism, he was sure, was ineradicable, a disease for which there could never be a cure. Nobody—other than religious Jews, Orthodox and Reformed, who at the time ruled it out altogether on religious grounds—could object to the determination of the First Zionist Congress (1897) to lay the foundation stone for a home for the Jewish people, if it were not the case that the chosen location of the state for Jews, Palestine, was already inhabited.¹

Herzl cared little, if at all, for the rights of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine, who constituted 95 percent of the population, and who would have to be got out of the ‘state for Jews’ (*Der Judenstaat*). He was careful in his public pronouncements, of course, to pretend that his project would not have any deleterious effect on the Arab population. On the contrary, he pretended, it would be to their benefit. An entry in his diary of 12 June 1895, however, signals Herzl’s real plans. Moving on from his comments on constituting a Jewish society in the land he got down to the question of forming a state for Jews. He wrote that, having occupied the land and expropriated the private property, ‘We shall endeavour to expel the poor population across the border unnoticed, procuring employment for it in the transit countries, but denying it any employment in our own country.’ He added that both ‘the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly’.²

In seeking support for his project, Herzl reflected typical nineteenth-century European colonialist attitudes. His proposed state for Jews would be ‘a portion of the rampart

of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilisation [Herzl’s term was *Kultur*] opposed to barbarism’.³ Elsewhere he reflects the world-view of European racist superiority. He assured the Grand Duke of Baden that Jews returning to their ‘historic fatherland’ would do so as representatives of Western civilisation, bringing ‘cleanliness, order and the well-established customs of the Occident to this plague-ridden, blighted corner of the Orient’.⁴ In Joseph Conrad’s terms, Herzl’s state for Jews would be an ‘outpost of progress’ in ‘the heart of darkness’. Nor was Herzl alone in his determination to rid a land of its indigenous Arabs.

Repeopling Palestine

If Queen Elizabeth I spoke of ‘repeopling’ Ireland, and establishing ‘plantations’, the Herzlian Zionists preferred the term ‘population transfer’. In both cases, settlers were implanted, who brought with them different politico-historical loyalties, a new language, and a new religion or denomination. Combinations of these elements of group differentiation, allied with asymmetric power interrelations, contributed to profound political instability in both Ireland and Palestine, whose effects have been felt ever since. Moreover, in some circles in each context, religious affiliation not only provided distinctive social markers but also supplied some of the ideological support for the settlement projects.

³ *The Jewish State. An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, the seventh edition, revised with a foreword by Israel Cohen (London: Henry Pordes, 1993), p. 30, being a translation of Herzl’s *Der Judenstaat. Versuch einer Modernen Lösung der Judenfrage* (Leipzig und Wien: M. Breitenstein’s Verlags-Buchhandlung, 1896). The German original was translated into English by Sylvie d’Avigdor as *A Jewish State*, and in 1946 as *The Jewish State*, and published by the American Zionist Emergency Council. *Der Judenstaat* might be translated more appropriately by ‘The State for Jews’, to distinguish it from the implications of a Jewish state (*Jüdischer Staat*). Herzl composed the first draft of *Der Judenstaat* between June and July 1895, and imparted his scheme in his address to a meeting of the Maccabean Club in London (24 November 1895), at which Israel Zangwill presided. A couple of months later, he summarised his scheme in London’s *Jewish Chronicle* (17 January 1896), ‘A “Solution of the Jewish Question”’. The paper’s editorial was sceptical of ‘a scheme which is the outcome of despair.’ For several more years the editor continued to view Zionism as ‘ill-considered, retrogressive, impracticable, even dangerous.’

⁴ *The Complete Diaries*, Vol. I: 343. Herzl began his Diaries in 1895, and continued until shortly before his death. Seven volumes of the Letters and Diaries have been published (Berlin: Propylaen Verlag), Vols. I–III edited by Johannes Wachten *et al* (1983–85), and Vols. IV–VII by Barbara Schäfer (1990–96). Raphael Patai edited an English translation of the diaries in five volumes (Herzl, Theodor. 1960. *The Complete Diaries of Theodore Herzl*. 5 vols., ed. Raphael Patai, trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Herzl Press). In general, I quote from Patai’s edition, which I have checked against the original in Wachten and Schäfer. Where I judge it to be important, I give the original language from the latter.

¹ I have traced elsewhere the metamorphosis of the religious estimation of Political Zionism, from being an anathema to occupying a position of virtual sacred significance within religious Jewish thinking. See ‘From the Secular to the Sacred’, in Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1999) 67–102.

² ‘Die arme Bevölkerung trachten wir unbemerkt über die Grenze zu schaffen, indem wir in den Durchzugsländern Arbeit verschaffen aber in unserem eigenen Lande jederlei Arbeit verweigern’, Theodor Herzl, *Briefe und Autobiographische Notizen, 1886–1895*, vol. II, ed. Johannes Wachten *et al.*, (Berlin: Propylaen Verlag, 1983) 117–18.

The euphemism ‘repeopling’ is attested also in the case of Israel. Although many Palestinians were expelled from Galilee in 1948, some 60 percent of Israel’s Arab population still live there as citizens of Israel, and their presence has been a source of concern to the Israeli authorities ever since. For the goal of establishing a large Jewish majority in Galilee Israel had customarily used the term the ‘Judaisation of Galilee’ (*yehud hagalil*, in Hebrew) as its slogan. However, sensitive to the negative connotations of such a term Israeli governments, particularly since Land Day (30 March 1976), have preferred the terms ‘repeopling, or populating the Galilee’ (*Ichloos hagalil*, in Hebrew) and ‘developing the Galilee’ (*petoah hagalil*).⁵

While Elizabeth’s determination to implant new people into Ireland was a matter of public knowledge—she advertised her intention to have Munster ‘repeopled and inhabited with civile loyal and dutifule subjects’ who would ‘live in the service of Almighty God’⁶—the Zionist leaders were determined to keep their plans secret. They did, however, leave behind not only the physical outcome in 1948 of their transfer enterprise, but also a considerable body of written material which indicates clearly their intentions.

There is a ‘mountain’ of evidence in the Zionist and Israeli archives tracing the consistency of the ‘population transfer’ line of thinking within the Jewish leadership in Palestine. This evidence has been systematically examined by Nur Masalha, and has been brought to public attention since the early 1990s.⁷ One knew long before then, of course, that 80 percent of the Arabs in what became the State of Israel were expelled, but the archival evidence shows systematically that the determination to rid the land of non-Jews was an integral part of the Zionist programme. The archival material, then, demonstrates that the expulsion of the indigenous Arabs was foreseen as necessary, was systematically planned and was executed at the first opportunity, in 1948, both before and after the declaration of the State of Israel.

From the Zionist archives we learn in detail how prominent was the theme of the necessity of ‘transfer’ in the thinking of the Zionist leadership from the middle 1930s, at least. We read of the establishment and comportsment of the two ‘Population Transfer Committees’ (1937 to 1944), and of the third ‘Population Transfer Committee’ established by the government of the State of Israel in August 1948. The damage done to the indigenous population in 1948, then, was neither

accidental nor due to the unique pressures of war, but was at the heart of the Zionist enterprise from the beginning.

Masalha’s studies, based on primary research in various Zionist archives, then, fundamentally undermine the hegemonic Zionist narrative that its intentions were altogether innocent, if not indeed altruistic. By uncovering such evidence Masalha demonstrates that the imperative to ‘transfer’ the indigenous Arab population was at the core of the Zionist enterprise from the beginning, and was pursued with determination at the levels of both planning and execution. His contribution to the discourse on 1948 is more complete than that of the Israeli ‘New Historians’, for he not only lets the Zionist evidence concerning 1948 speak for itself, but also shows how prominent was the necessity of ‘transfer’ in the thinking of the Zionist leadership from the beginning.

Challenge to theology and morality

Against that background, then, the State of Israel is a challenge to theology and morality for several reasons, to four of which, in particular, I draw attention:

1. The claim is made that the Bible is the ‘Jews’ sacrosanct title-deed to Palestine’. And consequently, since the Bible is of divine provenance, the rights of the indigenous population simply do not count. There are two major problems about appeal to the Bible. Firstly, the gift of the land to the Israelites in the biblical narrative is inextricably related to the divine mandate to exterminate the indigenous population. A naive reading of those texts portrays God as a militaristic, xenophobic and nationalistic genocidist, insufficiently moral even to conform to the demands of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Secondly, these biblical narratives are highly problematic in the light of the use to which they have been put to underpin the various enterprises of colonial destruction of indigenous peoples, in Latin America, South Africa, and Palestine.⁸

2. The existence of the State of Israel attracts a unique vocabulary of approval by (religious) Jews and Christians, e.g.

—A free Jewish State with Jerusalem as its capital represents the core of Jewish existence and aspirations (Rabbi A James Rudin).

—The living reality of the State of Israel should evoke the respect and admiration of the Christian theologian. How could the renewal of the land be anything to the theologian but a wonder of love and vitality, and the reborn state be anything but a sign of God’s concern for his people? (Monsignor John Oesterreicher).

⁵ I am grateful to Dr Nur Masalha for this information (private correspondence, 11 April 2003).

⁶ Devon Record Office, Courtenay Papers, Articles for the plantation of Munster, 1586, in Philip S Robinson, *The Plantation of Ulster: British Settlement in an Irish Landscape, 1600-1670* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984) 57, 6.

⁷ See, in particular, Nur Masalha’s *Expulsion of the Palestinians: the Concept of ‘Transfer’ in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), and his *A Land without a People. Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians 1949-96* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997). Masalha’s later book, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: The Politics of Expansion, 1967-2000* (London: Pluto, 2000) is a comprehensive treatment of the imperial imperative within Herzlian Zionism. His most recent book, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (London and Stirling VA: Pluto Press, 2003) exposes Israel’s pretence to innocence on the question of the Palestinian expulsees.

⁸ I deal with these matters in Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism. A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, repr. 1999). The enquiry could easily be extended to the colonisation of North America and many of the African countries. I am currently extending the catalogue to include Ireland in a study in Gaelic, the indigenous language which the colonisers almost succeeded in obliterating (*An Biobla agus an Leatrom* [The Bible and Oppression], Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, forthcoming 2004).

—Christians should ‘rejoice in the return of the Jewish people to a small sliver of their ancient homeland—if not from compassion and a sense of justice at least from a sense of guilt and repentance’ (Father Edward Flannery).⁹

—The adulation of Zionism is no less striking in Father Robert F Drinan, Dean of Boston College Law School. With language that would have surprised Herzl, Drinan describes the Zionist visionary as having pursued his ‘messianic pilgrimage’ with a zeal ‘infused with a compelling humanitarianism combined with traces of Jewish mysticism’. And now that Herzl has died, the ‘mystery’ and ‘majesty’ of Zionism appears in its glory from his tomb.¹⁰

3. Some (fundamentalist) Evangelical Christians associate the State of Israel with the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and with the end-time. We shall allude later to the moral problematic of such a stance.

4. The Underside: It is, of course, the underside of the Zionist project that raises the moral problematic most profoundly. In the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948–49 the country was occupied by a foreign minority, emptied almost entirely of its indigenous people and more than 400 of its villages were destroyed. Despite the clear evidence for the intended and planned ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the indigenous population, the Zionist conquest is hailed by some as a miraculous act of God and a victory for freedom and civilised values. Indeed, the foreseen and planned forcible displacement of an indigenous people from its homeland continues to be supported from abroad, financially, politically, and even theologically. Frequently, the Palestinian *Nakba* is ignored, suppressed, or denied, and this tendency is clearly detectable in the mainstream Churches, as well as in theological institutions and university academies. Indeed, the performance of the Churches is less reprehensible in these matters than is that of the universities and the media.

The establishment of the State of Israel, then, raises all sorts of questions, concerning not only issues of biblical interpretation, but of the very authority of some biblical traditions. Relationships between religious affiliation and ‘nationalism’, as well as between the relevant religions also surface. Nevertheless, the consistency with which the State of Israel is excused from having to conform to International Law and decent behaviour is one of the great eccentricities of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century political ethics and religious and theological discourse.

How do the Churches react?

The ‘Holy Land’ is of particular interest to Christians, not only in the land itself but universally. The Christians of the Holy Land have never been very appreciative of its intentions or of what Political Zionism has actually done to them. In 1948 some 50,000 Christians—some put the numbers much higher—were among the some 750,000 Palestinians expelled from what became the State of Israel. Since then, the remaining Christians live either as unequal citizens in Israel, or under Israeli occupation. While living as unequal citizens of Israel is not altogether agreeable, being under occupation has been particularly offensive: ‘Occupation is always a corrupting situation both for occupier and occupied. A wooden cage or a golden cage is still a cage’. Today, they struggle on, hoping for a better future.

Christians outside also have their interests. They fall into a number of categories:

1. The most vociferous are those in the fundamentalist Evangelical Zionist wing. Although not nearly as numerous as mainstream Christians, they are much more ideologically committed, politically focused and influential, and in the US have the ear of President George W. Bush and his policy-makers. For them, what happened in 1948 and since is part of God’s intention that the Children of Israel be gathered ‘to Jerusalem’. Indeed, it will speed up the Second Coming of Christ. Rather than concentrate on Jesus’ exhortations during his First Coming—e.g., to feed the hungry, heal the lame, give sight to the blind, clothe the naked, free the prisoners, etc.—such people are happier waiting for the Second Coming, with its Armageddon massacre. Meanwhile, they support a regime in Israel and the Occupied Territories that specialises in making the poor poorer, in making those with perfect sight blind, in making the walking lame, etc.

That Palestine was already occupied by Arabs, who would have to be driven out to fulfil the ‘ethnic-cleansing’ intentions of Political Zionism, is of little moral concern for many such people. Why? Because of how they interpret the prophetic and apocalyptic biblical texts. Their interpretation is not only naïve but is fundamentally immoral. A god such as theirs is the Great Ethnic-Cleanser, a militaristic and xenophobic genocidist, who is not sufficiently moral even to conform to the requirements of the Fourth Geneva Convention, or of any of the Human Rights Protocols which attempt to set limits to barbarism. The grotesque views of such people, embracing an essentially ethnic-cleansing enterprise as a fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and clothing Political Zionism in the garment of piety, would not warrant serious attention were it not for the influence they have on the domestic and foreign policies of the USA. They are also, of course, easy targets for the liberal establishment in the Church, the Universities and the media, whose own performance has been scarcely better.

2. The performance of the mainstream Churches has not been a model of ethical engagement. It is one of the anomalies of recent history that, while Christians have supported oppressed peoples virtually everywhere else, there has been relatively little protest against the historic injustice perpetrated on the indigenous population of Palestine. Many

⁹ In *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relation*: Rudin, p. 17; Oesterreicher, p. 35; Flannery, p. 76, who also claims that Zionism is ‘a sacred word’ with an ‘honourable history’, and hence support for the state is a *sine qua non* of the dialogue (‘the Jewish-Christian embrace’, p. 79). For a fuller discussion of the proclivities of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, see Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel*, 123–31.

¹⁰ Robert F Drinan, *Honor the Promise: America’s Commitment to Israel* (Cape Town, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 32, 39.

Christians, of course, are sympathetic to the ideal of a state for Jews as compensation for the litany of European persecutions of Jews. That it is others who have to pay the price is all the better. Moreover, even when faced with compelling evidence about the damage done to the Palestinians these people remain rather detached, preferring prudence to criticism. They cannot bring themselves to face the dark side of Political Zionism. In any case, taking a stand for Palestinian rights will not advance one's reputation, or help one's promotion prospects in the Church, the Universities or the media. The performance of the Universities on this question is much worse than that of the mainstream Churches. But one does look to the Churches for moral guidance. Their performance, one would hope, would not be compromised, as much as the universities are, by questions of funding and ideologically-tied philanthropy.

3. There are, of course, many Christians who approach the question of Palestine from a Human Rights perspective. They acknowledge the fundamental injustice done in 1948, and the atrocities associated with the occupation. Such people, typically, are not in positions of power or leadership within the Churches. The most the leaders of the Churches, by and large, appear able to bring themselves to is to subscribe to the 'fallacy of balance'. The conscience of the Church leadership is virtually paralysed by guilt, mostly about what was done to Jews in Europe in the past, for which they themselves are hardly responsible. Such is their guilt also that they leave unchallenged a Zionist reading of Jewish history and of recent events in Palestine.

The leaderships of the mainstream Churches offer no critique of the ideology of Political Zionism commensurate with that of *apartheid*, for example, an ideology which Black South Africans consider to be of far less deleterious consequences than Zionism. To add to the Church's neglect, the evidence is abundant that the damage done to the indigenous population of Palestine was neither accidental nor due to the unique pressures of war, but was at the heart of the Zionist enterprise from the beginning. Yet, the Churches reflect little appetite to pursue these issues of justice and respect for historical truth. However inadequate, their performance is somewhat better than that of the Academy.

Clearly, the Churches are faced with a major moral challenge. They should give a lead in moral debate, rather than merely fall into line with ongoing political manoeuvres, which in conforming to the demands of the powerful, reflect little contact with recognisable moral principles. For religious bodies in any way to accord legitimacy to the expulsion of an indigenous population, and the appropriation of their lands is, one would hope, highly problematic, even in the interests of promoting good relations between two religious traditions. Uncritical acceptance of a Zionist reading of Judaism and Jewish experience—however offensive to historical truth and questions of justice—appears to be a compulsory tenet for participants in the conventional Jewish-Christian dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is admirable and indeed necessary. It should not, however, compromise on questions

of historical truth and contemporary justice.¹¹

Does not the Church have a moral mission, to speak truth, however uncomfortable, to criticise systems of structural domination, and to work for a moral future for humanity? In order to retain its credibility the Church should engage in ongoing 'criticism' of our society and our culture, by way of weighing up and evaluating trends and developments. And in this matter the role of the leadership of the Church is critical, since it in particular is perceived to represent the teaching authority of the Church. Nothing is more reprehensible in a Church leader than the avoidance of—that characteristic turning away from—a difficult and principled position which one knows to be right. A Church leader should not shy away from being 'too political' or 'controversial', in preference to being 'balanced, objective and moderate', reposing comfortably within the 'responsible mainstream'. These dispositions are not only reprehensible, but are altogether corrupting. Church leaders appear to have a particular problem in the matter of the toughest of all contemporary issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history continues to hobble, blinker, and muzzle many who know the truth, and who are in a position to serve it. The Christian faithful looks to its leadership to give a lead, particularly in virtue of the leaders' vocation to speak the truth with determination and compassion.

I am not aware of any Church leader—dean, bishop, archbishop, cardinal, patriarch, minister, presbyter, *et al.*—who has dared in a public forum to offer a moral critique of the *ideology* of Political Zionism commensurate with that of, e.g., *apartheid*. Though we know that the damage done to the Palestinians was at the heart of the Zionist enterprise from the beginning, the Church leadership reflects little appetite to pursue the relevant issues of justice and respect for historical truth. The situation, of course, is even worse in the Universities. And as for the media ... ! But even if the Universities and the media have consistently abandoned any pretence to moral propriety on the issue, the Church, surely, should do better.

For a start, one might expect that the leaderships of the Christian Churches should be prepared to insist that Israel 'come clean' on its seminal injustice against the Palestinian Arabs, that it apologise for it, undo the damage it has perpetrated, as far as that is possible, honour its obligations with respect to the Palestinian right of return, make appropriate compensation for the damage done, and, on the basis of confession and restitution, move towards a less ethnocentric polity. Such exhortations would flow effortlessly from principles of Christian morality, and would be in conformity with elementary justice. What we get instead is the embrace of whatever proposal—the Oslo Accords, the 'Road Map', etc.—however jaded, and however lacking in principles of justice, the asymmetric parties to the dispute contrive, as though the Christian Church were content to act on the novel moral principle that the rights of the perpetrators of injustice and its victims are finely balanced.

¹¹ See further, Michael Prior, 'Speaking Truth in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue', in *A Faithful Presence. Essays for Kenneth Cragg*, ed. David Thomas and Clare Amos (London: Melisende, 2003) 327-47.

JESUS AND THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

Duncan Macpherson

This sermon on John 4 was preached at the United Reformed Church in Twickenham for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2002. It will appear in *The Pilgrim Preacher*, to be published by Melisende in the spring of 2004.

You may be wondering how appropriate this long section of John's Gospel is for a service in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Well, our experience of Ecumenism is an experience of encounter across barriers. Our friendships are becoming firmly established now, but some of us may remember when meetings between Christians of different denominations were occasions of some embarrassment, when awareness of our differences was much more to the fore than awareness of what we had in common. Listening to the way that the Samaritan woman fenced with Jesus in her conversation at the well, we can sympathise with her embarrassment.

For several reasons, the meeting between the two was a break with convention. Not only was the woman a woman in a culture where women were regarded as a threat to ritual purity, but she was a woman in an irregular relationship. She and Jesus also belonged to rival traditions. The two traditions shared a lot. Like the Samaritans, the Judeans believed in the one God and in five books of Moses. The passage tells us that they also expected the coming of the Messiah. That sounds like a considerable area of agreement, but the differences seemed much greater in the mind both of the woman and of the author of the Gospel. 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a me a woman of Samaria?' For Jews have nothing in common with Samaritans'

That is true today. Those of you who have been to the Holy Land may have visited the Church of Jacob's Well near the Palestinian town of Nablus in the West Bank. Overlooking the town there is Mount Gerizim, where a tiny community of Samaritans celebrates Passover every year. When you go up onto the Mount, you can visit a small museum of Samaritan history. You can also see the place where they sacrifice the animals for this festival—something the Jews have not done since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. One of the reasons that the Samaritan community is so small today is that they refuse to intermarry with non-Samaritans. The Samaritans who live on Mount Gerizim refuse to accept Israeli citizenship or to use the Hebrew language except in their services. Now as then 'Jews have nothing in common with Samaritans.'

Another thing you notice when you visit the Holy Land is that the Christians have been keeping each other at arms-length for some time as well. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity, different Churches have separate areas for their services—separate altars for which they are responsible. There have been occasions when monks of rival ancient churches have resorted to blows over trespass on disputed sacred ground. Some Evangelical Christians favour a rival Holy Sepulchre in the Garden a mile away from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. And near Bethlehem there are separate Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant 'Shepherds' Fields'—presumably some of the shepherds in the Christmas story were Catholic and others were Orthodox or Protestant! The rival sites of the Jews and the Samaritans provide a pattern of something in human nature that has not changed!

Well, the good news is that change is possible. It is possible because people of all kinds need the same things. They need water for

a start: 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' So the woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?' She thought he was talking about ordinary water—an understandable mistake. Water is scarce in the Holy Land even today. In October 2002, the Israelis announced measures to forbid the Palestinians in the West Bank from drawing any more water. They said that this was to be a collective punishment for a suicide attack on an Israeli bus, but the use of scarce water resources as a weapon was already well established. But Jesus was talking about the water that human beings thirst for even more than for ordinary water—'Whoever drinks of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' The fact that the woman was a Samaritan made no difference. The fact that she was a woman in a world where men did not socialise with women outside their own family circle made no difference. The fact that the woman had a colourful private life made no difference. She was able to recognise Jesus as the Christ and bring other people to him. Those who believed in Jesus needed the same living water and drank from the same living water.

So it is with Christians. Their rival holy places and traditions may divide them, but they are united at the level of their deepest spiritual need. They are united, too, by the gift of God that satisfies that need. The gift transcends the differences between the people who receive it: 'The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem. . . but the hour is coming and now is when those who worship God will worship him in spirit and in truth.'

So here we are, united by our need and by the gift we have received in answer to that need—united by our faith in Christ and by the living water that we have shared in our baptism. As we apply this truth to our lives, we find that we cannot help growing in unity with each other. Our sisters and brothers in the Churches of the Holy Land have begun to experience this growing together. Oppressed by the political situation in which they find themselves, and with their very survival as a community threatened, the Palestinian Christians have formed bonds of unity through the Middle East Council of Churches. Unlike the case of the Roman Catholic Church in the World Council of Churches, where it has the status of observer, in the case of the Middle East Council of Churches, it is a full member, and the Latin Patriarch has served as its co-chair. Palestinian Christians have formed bonds of solidarity through Sabeel, an organisation that is trying to develop a liberation theology that speaks to their situation. Palestinian Christians have formed bonds of unity through Al-Liqa', an interfaith organisation that promotes a new dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Their need brings them together, but so too does the gift they have received—their sharing in the living water of Christ.

Does this connect in any way with us? I would suggest that it does. We can find common purpose in showing support and solidarity for the Palestinians and not least for the Palestinian Christians, the Living Stones of the Holy Land. We can learn too from their experience. We find common purpose in showing support and solidarity for oppressed people everywhere. The encounter with Christ takes us beyond our differences and invites us to experience something quite different. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, 'The hour is coming and now is when those who worship God will worship him in spirit and in truth.'