



Tracing the Path of Living Stones

Local Christianity and the National Cause

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The Palestine question is the crux of the Middle East conflict, and a myriad of perspectives within that question have been duly explored. But the role of local Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has yet to have its day in the publishing houses. This paper is an introductory attempt to briefly shed light - not on those stones that bore witness to the coming of Jesus Christ - but on the living stones: Palestinian Christians caught in the crucible of an instable environment within the broader context of Arab nationalism.

Christian Influence in Nationalist Trends

The Christian church was, in its earliest days, one undivided church. The process of fragmentation commenced well before the first Muslim entry into Jerusalem; in 638 AD,

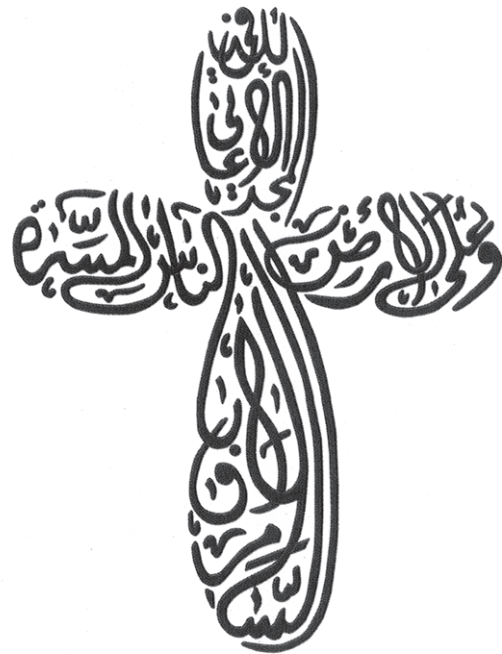


a number of communities split from the central church. There was, however, still only one Jerusalem patriarch and it was he who negotiated with the Muslim conquerors on behalf of the Christian residents in the area. In subsequent periods, however, Christian history in Jerusalem is primarily a history of fluctuating status, rights, ownership and positioning between the Holy Land's various Christian communities.

Somewhere near the start of the sixteenth century onwards, the Orthodox Church became generally more influential than the Latin Church, despite brief periods of reversion. The decades of Ottoman control saw the injection of international politics into the sectarian controversies surrounding Jerusalem and the holy sites. Thus, various countries (for example, France, Russia, England) claimed the right to protect subjects that shared their like beliefs.

For administrative purposes, the non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire were organized into autonomous religious communities known as "millets". Their leaders were chosen by the people of the "millet", but that choice was subject to the Ottoman Sultan's approval. The "millet" was autonomous in spiritual matters and in certain administrative and judicial affairs. Consequently, this millet system aided foreign interventions that arrived as a result of Western expansion, the spreading of imperialism and the exploitation of local resources and markets. The presence of the various Christian groups and their sectoral axis motivated foreign interventions under the motto and guise of protecting Christianity.

Through this interaction, Arab societies' contact with the West revived their liberationist heritage and the goal of building a nationalism on the foundations of shared destiny and civilization, accomplishments in social and economic justice, achievements in modern science and its application, and a



The Bible verse Luke 2:14, written in Arabic calligraphy in the shape of a cross.

revival of Arab heritage. Christians played an acknowledged role in this process. Hisham Sharabi writes that, "Christian intellectual movements...[were] the product of a social and psychological process specific to the experience of some Christian social classes in Syria (including Lebanon and Palestine)."

To a large extent, this transformation resulted from changes in Christian education in the nineteenth century, and from a goal of social change forwarded by many Christians at that time. Those who expressed this best were those most affected, i.e. the Christian "intellectuals". For example, we find in Najib Azouri's 1905 book published in French, *Le Réveil de la Nation Arabe* (The Awakening of the Arab Nation), an articulation of the existence of a single Arab nation that:

[E]qually includes Christians and Muslims, and where the religious problems that crop up between the followers of different religions are really political problems artificially



aroused by external powers for their own interests, and therefore it is necessary that a purely Arab Christian church be founded - that is, that an Arab Catholic church replace the many sects that currently practice worship in Arabic.

It might be said then, that from its outset Arab nationalist awareness was indebted to the efforts of Christian thinkers who urged for the nationalization of Islamic history and considered social unity the basis for the concept of the Arab homeland. One of the most prominent Arab nationalists was the famous writer, Sati al-Husari, who made a deep impression on contemporary Arab thought in the decades following World War I. Al-Husari argued that, from a historical point of view, the growth of the Arab nation was closely linked to the development of Islam and its civilization; however, he did not think that the Arabs were at heart an Islamic nation. "They remain Arabs even if they do not remain Muslims," he wrote.

In the era beginning with the last throes of the Crimean War and the start of World War I, there was a broad expansion of Christian interests in Palestine. By 1880, over a hundred schools scattered throughout the country were being run by various societies linked to foreign churches and countries. Thus, missionaries flourished.

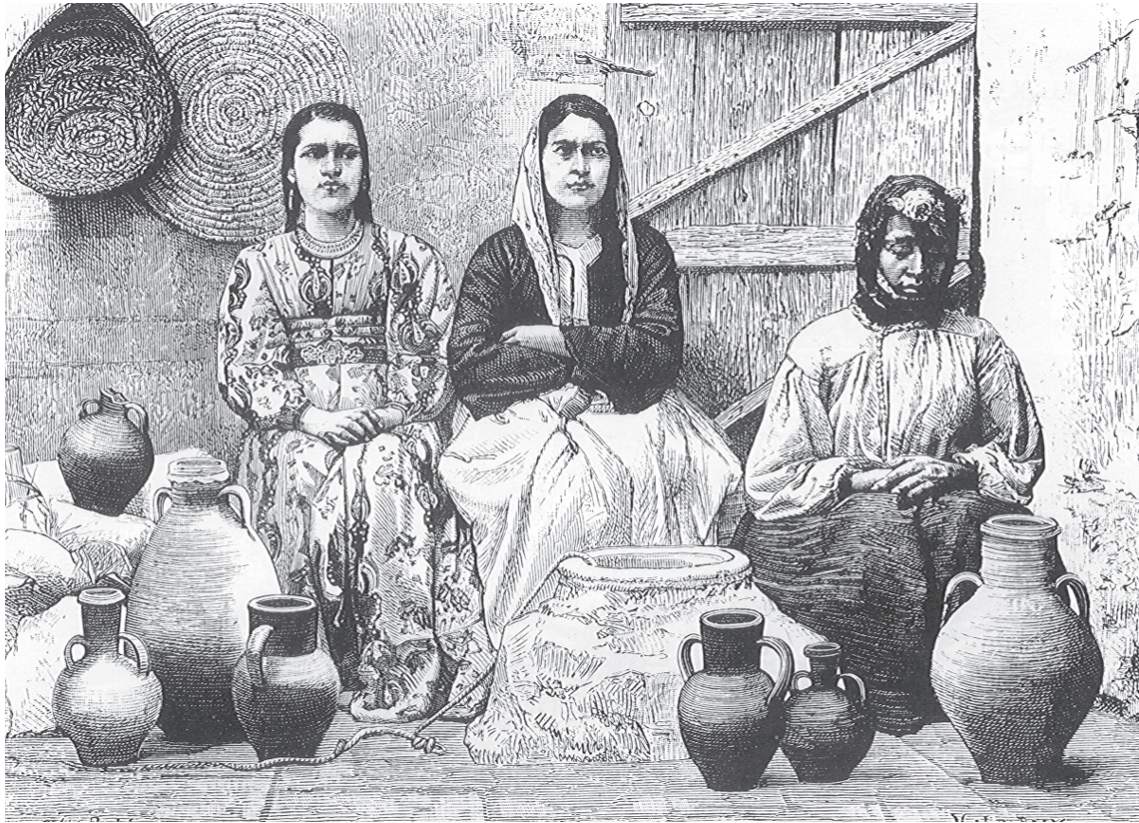
In the Mandate Period

Before the Islamic conquest of Palestine, Christians were the overwhelming majority of the population, and of them, the majority belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church in Palestine until the later part of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the British Mandate period, the Christian population in Palestine was only 9.6 percent of the total population. In the 1931 census, it was reduced even further to 8.8 percent. The

number of Arab Christians as compared with the overall population, even excluding Jewish immigrants, continued to shrink as a result of a lower birth rate and ongoing emigration. More Christians than Muslims sought to migrate in search of economic opportunities.

This spate of Christian emigration began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and specifically affected the Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah regions of Palestine. The position of the Christian communities was fairly closely defined by the British Mandate and the 1922 Order in Council. But within this framework, there was still no legal provision to continue the network of privileges and immunities that had been placed on various communities under Ottoman rule. The rights and privileges connected to the Holy Places, as defined in Ottoman statutes, were laid down in the Status Quo of 1757 and confirmed again in 1852. Still, in the view of various Christian communities, control of Palestine by the British was better than Turkish control.

Given the official British commitment to facilitating the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine through the Balfour Declaration, the Arabs of Palestine (Christians *and* Muslims) raised opposition to the Zionist project, thus creating widespread antagonism among Palestinian Arab Christians, who considered themselves part and parcel of the Arab nationalist movement, with its broader and overlapping claims. As such, one notable feature of the years of 1917-1920 was the organization of Muslim-Christian Societies in the leading towns of Palestine, with the purpose of placing pressure on the Peace Conference and the British government to abrogate the Balfour Declaration. The Muslim-Christian Societies, like the Arab nationalists, also demanded the inclusion of a united Syria. These activities emphasized a growing nationalism over religious ties.



Christian women sell olive oil in an etching by Chapuis made from a photograph. Source: Ard il-dhakarayat.

As the inhabitants of Palestine recognized Zionist designs on their country, Christian Arab involvement in the national struggle spanned active resistance, the formation of parties and political organizations and the responsibilities of leadership, the production of written manuscripts, contributions to education and national guidance, campaigning for the cause of Palestine and financing the national movement. At the Third Palestinian Congress in December 1920, the Muslim-Christian Association (MCA) became the main organizational framework for the Palestinian Arab national movement.

The MCA intended from the start to establish itself as a body representing the Palestinian Arab population, and to forge an instrument through which to implement a public stand on the question of the country's future. The

appointment of two Christian vice-presidents - Ya'qub Farraj (a Greek Orthodox from Jerusalem) and Tawfiq Abdallah (of Acre) - alongside the Muslim president of the Arab Executive Council, Musa Kazim al-Husayni, demonstrates the leading role Arab Christians played during the years of the British Mandate.

Some authors have referred to an apprehension on the part of local Christians concerning Zionism and the accompanying threat of Jewish intellectual and economic competition. Local Christians were, for the most part, urban traders, craftsmen, shopkeepers and public officials. They feared that the new Jewish immigrants would deprive them of their social position. This anxiety was bolstered by the hostility towards Zionism they observed from the local British military administration, whose members



encouraged the establishment of the MCA, thus spurring on the anti-Zionist feelings of the Christian leadership. Of course, leaders of the Muslim community rejoiced at this Christian position. It was crucial that they be able to represent the anti-Zionist stand as one uniting the entire Arab population. They were certainly aware that a stand taken by Palestinian Christians against Zionism would have an impact on Christian opinion in Britain and throughout the West.

The Nascent State

To more fully understand the role of Arab Christians of Palestine in this national awakening, it is important to examine the institutions that Christians helped build. In the 1890s, Christians in Palestine were estimated at 13 percent of the entire population of the country, but their presence had a much broader effect on the nation's development.

Towards the mid-nineteenth century, various missions from European countries and Russia and the United States began showing a growing interest in the Holy Land and in its population. These missions resulted in the creation of what is referred to in modern parlance as "infrastructure" of education, health and other community services. The effects of this "infrastructure" were first manifested through the educational achievements of the Christian population, where Palestinian Christians found a leading role in specific sectors. A survey of the printing presses of this period shows that Palestinian Christians dominated the business. As early as 1908, Georgie Habib Hanania founded *al-Quds* newspaper in Jerusalem and Bandali Elias Mushahwar founded *al-Insaf*. Boulous Shehadeh published *Mir'at at-Sharq* in 1919 while Issa al-Issa and Youssef al-Issa published *Falastin* in 1911 in Jaffa and Wahbeh Tamari published *Abu Shadouf* in 1912. Even

Bethlehem, then a small town, had its own newspaper, *Sawt el Sha'b* (Voice of the People), published by Yousef el 'Araj and Issa Bandak.

Educational institutions were a similar area of focus. In 1851, Bishop Gobat of the Anglican Church established a school in his name that became known as the Bishop's School, while the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate established the Musalba School in 1855 that now has branches in Israel and the occupied territories. In 1879, the Catholic Order of St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle established their school in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, the College des Frères, which expanded in Bethlehem and Jaffa. Like other educational institutions, the College was open to all students, Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. This investment into education by the Frères culminated in 1973 with the establishment of Bethlehem University at the express desire of the Holy See.

Birzeit University began with the pioneering vision of the Nasser family, a Palestinian Anglican family from Birzeit village. In 1924, the late Moussa Nasser started the first school in his town; fifty years later Birzeit University is a leading institution of Palestinian higher education.

Throughout Palestine, there are scores of hospitals, clinics and specialized institutions run by local Christian Palestinians and churches, which catered over the years to thousands of Palestinian patients, particularly those with special needs. Associations and literary societies established by Palestinian Christians served the sick, poor and disabled. One such association was the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), which began in 1877 as a local branch of the London YMCA. Around the same time, Greek Orthodox youth set up their society and club. Women, too, were active in similar associations, particularly in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These



associations, especially the Orthodox Societies, became a political tool for mobilizing the public behind the Palestinian leadership.

Remarkable, too, were the activities of the *Jami'at al-Adab al-Zahirah* (The Society of the Flourishing Arts), which specialized in promoting the Arabic language, its literature and art. Established in 1898 by a group of Jerusalemites, its driving force was made up of young Christians: Daoud Sidawi, Farraj Farrajallah, Eftim Mushabak, Shibli al-Jamal, Nakhleh Tarazi, Khalil Sakakini and Jamil Khalidi. Many visitors to Palestine from neighbouring countries, poets and literary figures in particular, commented on the activities of the society.

New Worries, Ongoing Commitment

Given their early role in building Palestinian infrastructure, Palestinian Christians continue to contribute far more to the national community than their numbers initially suggest. This role is tied to a relatively high level of education, and to a tendency towards liberal professions and white-collar occupations.

Worldwide, Palestinian Christians currently number 400,000 or 6.7 percent of the total Palestinian population of six million. Fifty-one thousand of these 400,000 Palestinian Christians live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while another 114,000 Palestinian Christians live in Israel. This indigenous Christian population numbers 165,000 or 41.3 percent of all Palestinian Christians worldwide. But of the entire population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Christians today make up only 2.9 percent. In the records of the churches, that number is constantly declining.

In 1948, with the creation of the State of Israel, over 714,000 Palestinians became refugees. Seven percent or 50,000 of these

refugees were Christians. The refugee experience has informed that of Christians as a whole as they experienced the pressures of occupation and dispersal.

The Beit Sahour Tax Revolt of 1989 is one example of Christian grassroots participation in challenging the occupation. The village led a civil disobedience campaign against Israeli authorities that was met with heavy Israeli countermeasures.

History has shown that local Christians tended to express their anger and frustration through peaceful means such as unarmed demonstrations. At the time of the siege of the Nativity Church, church leaders and their congregations organized a variety of demonstrations and prayer services, and held masses to call for a peaceful end to the siege of one of Christianity's holiest shrines.

While Palestinian Christians are certainly among those imprisoned and martyred in the current Intifada, perhaps the most marked impact of the occupation on the community has been continued emigration. The numbers are dramatic: while at the turn of the nineteenth century Palestinian Christians made up 13 percent of the total population, today, according to church circles, their numbers have dwindled to less than 1.6 percent. Political and economic instability are major considerations as Christians decide to emigrate from the Holy Land. In one example, as a result of the current Intifada, more than 2,400 Christians from the Bethlehem area (including Beit Sahour and Beit Jala) have emigrated abroad.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism is also a consideration as the community weighs the prospects of coexistence, but it is not a sufficient enough worry to merit leaving the country. Trends within political Islam place local Christians in the same category as the "West", thus accusing them of being the comprador or protégé of western powers. This has resulted in the relative alienation of



Christians as they look for an exit.

In this context, a new generation of Christians is seeking to activate their role in certain aspects of Palestinian life by founding The Laity Committee in the Holy Land. The main goal of this committee is to reaffirm and protect local Christian heritage and roots, in addition to clarifying their positions in support of the local church. As one of the members put it to me, "We intend to raise our voice and make the point that it is no longer acceptable that the imams in the mosques marginalize or ignore the other half of the equation."

Christians insist on living in Palestine, not on the basis of tolerance or protection by the Muslim majority, but on the basis of equal rights between people. As Palestinian reforms continue, including the drafting of a new constitution for the Palestinian state, Palestinian Christians, while admitting themselves a minority, continue to advocate for a secular, pluralist Palestinian society. They demand, as a matter of principle, that the constitution consider all citizens equal before the law, with no discrimination on the basis of religion, race, or colour. Their position is supported by key Christian representation in the Palestinian Authority, and in non-governmental institutions.

As of this writing (prior to the cabinet selections of Ahmad Qurei) there are two Christian cabinet ministers, as well as Christian representation on the Palestine Liberation Organization Executive Committee. Among the 86 Legislative Council members, six are Christian. Two major Palestinian factions are headed by Christians, namely, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine head George Habash (now retired) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine head Nayef Hawatmeh. Moreover, the mayors of both Bethlehem and Ramallah are Christians, as are the mayors of smaller villages like Beit

Sahour, Beit Jala, Zababdeh, Birzeit, Rafidya and others.

The challenge of state-building in a transparent and professional manner and within the guidelines of democratic norms, thereby putting an end to the Israeli occupation and living peacefully with the State of Israel is the primary goal of the Palestinian people today. For Palestinian Christians - represented in their churches, organizations and individuals - the birth of the Palestinian state is a key element to stopping the emigration of these "living stones," and opening the door to encourage the Diaspora to return to shape a regional future that is prosperous and tranquil and ever-distant from exclusive and radical trends.

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