

Jewish-Christian Relation in the Holy Land / Hana Bendcowsky

Just before coming here I spent 2 weeks in Haifa on top of Mt. Carmel, conducting a course for Israeli educators and teachers, titled "Education for tolerance: The Christian Communities in the Holy Land". It is the 7th year that JCJCR organizes this course. The course includes history, culture and traditions of the communities as well as current issues of the community life, politics and relations between state and society, all taught by Jewish and Arab Christian lecturers. By the end of the very intensive 8 days, the reaction of the participants is the same every year: "How come we were never taught about this?", "It was eye opening. Sporadic details I knew suddenly integrated" or "How come I never asked my neighbor about her traditions?" These are some typical reactions for the first encounter of Israeli Jews with the topic. I find curiosity and interest, but also with some hesitation.

Background

For the last 2 millennia Jews had lived as minorities among Christian and Muslim societies. This had come to define their identity as well as their theological views. Modernity had faced the Jews with new challenges. With the disappearance of the medieval community, Jews had to redefine their identity. Some of them chose to recreate the conservative community in the Modern society by closing themselves to the modern world. Others chose to assimilate in the general society. Still others searched a way to preserve their identity in a changing world. I would just mention some of the ways created: Modern-Orthodoxy, Reform Judaism, Yiddishism and the Zionist Movement.

Since the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel in 1948, Jews are no longer a minority in Israel, yet it seems that many Israelis still see themselves as a minority, a thing which defines their identity and behavior. The memories of the recent horrible Holocaust as well as persecutions against Jews through the ages are still the backbone of Israeli identity and are strengthened by education. Jews still feel as a minority - a minority of Jews among Arabs in the Middle East and a minority of Jews in the Western Christian world. This has a direct impact on the relations between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land.

Most Israelis – whether Sephardim or Ashkenazim, religious or secular, Right or Left – have few opportunities to meet and get to know Palestinian Christians. In the absence of contact, they tend to harbor negative attitudes toward Arab Christians, viewing them not as an imperiled double minority among the Muslims and the Jews, but rather as a threatening double majority that is linked both with the Arab world,

with which Israel has been in political conflict for decades, and as part of the vast Christian world, with which the Jewish people was in religious conflict for centuries. Furthermore, most local Christians are linked by language and culture with the Arab world and see themselves as Palestinians. Therefore their national identity is in conflict with the national identity of the majority of Israeli Jews.

Moreover, most Israelis are not aware of the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the Western Christian churches in recent decades, nor are they cognizant of the vastly different historic experience of the local, largely Eastern, Christian communities as centuries-long minorities. That which is – and isn't – taught about Christianity and the Christian communities in the Israeli education system tends to reinforce the negative stereotypes regarding local Christians.

Ironically, the Arab Christians, who have the potential to bridge and mediate between the Arab World and the Christian World, Eastern and western, were left out of most attempts for a dialogue.

Difficulties

Initiatives for a direct Dialogue between Christians and Jews have started in the middle of the 20th century when the Jewish-Christian dialogue was centered in the West. A Growing interest in this dialogue was shown from the Christian side taking into account the decades of living together in Europe, the Jewish roots of Christianity as well as the aftermath of the Holocaust and the rethinking of the position of the church in the modern world. The Jewish contribution to the dialogue has been, among other things, helping interested and motivated Christians rediscover their Jewish origins and discussing the past. The importance of these efforts is high but in the context of the Holy Land it is not entirely relevant as it excludes from the dialogue our neighbors, those who we actually live with, that is to say the local Christians.

Yet Israeli Jews still often come to the dialogue with local Christians with the expectations that are a fruit of their experience in the West. They discover quickly that discussing issues such as the conflict between Christian and Jews in Europe, anti-Semitism, the holocaust, would be encountered with question marks or indifference. These reactions can be frustrating and offensive for Jews, who don't understand the local reality. For the local Christians who live as a minority in the Holy land for 1300 years, the European history is irrelevant. The Israeli Jews find it hard to step out of their point of view on history and try to understand the different context of the local Christians. Christian Arabs, on the other hand, find it hard to understand *why* the Israelis who live in the Modern State of Israel hold these perceptions, and

sometimes lack the awareness to changes needed or even the patience to wait for the process to happen.

Roughly half of the Jews in Israel have their background in the Arab Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Sephardim), while the other half (Ashkenazim) originates from Western Christian countries. One would assume that the Ashkenazim bearing the memory of the Jewish-Christian conflicts in the West would tend to have more negative attitude towards Christians, yet the reality is different. While the first generation of immigrants came from varied cultural background, the second and third generations, born in Israel and shaped by the Israeli education system, tend to adopt a common views shared by all Israelis. The Ashkenazi experience, including the Holocaust and the Jewish-Christian conflict in Europe, is adopted also by those who have their roots in the Arab-Muslim world. The current youth has very little knowledge and life experience of meeting with Christians. The result of this reality may be somewhat surprising. A Survey Published by JCJCR in 2009, in order to examine the attitudes of the Jewish population in Israel towards Christianity, Christians and the Christian presence in Israel, has shown that the younger generation (18-29 years old) developed a more negative attitude towards Christians and Christianity in comparison to the older generation.

On top of typical issues to dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians in general - land, history, civil rights, refugees etc - the dialogue with local Christians include also a strong theological aspect. Even The bible which is shared between Jews and Christians, introduce such a challenge from the Christian point of view. Jewish scholars in Israel have made a unique contribution to the study of the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Jewish background of the life and teaching of Jesus. They have produced works that gave new reality to the Word of God that illumine the bible for the Christians. But this is far from being a simple issue. I would like to quote the Emeritus Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem H.B. MICHEL SABBAAH in his Pastoral Letter "Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible" (November 1993):

"Reading the Bible, the Word of God, is a difficult, sensitive and delicate task, since the matters to be tackled are related to our daily life. They even concern our very national and personal identity as believers, because unilateral, partial interpretations run the risk for some people of bringing into question their presence and permanence in this land which is their homeland. What is the relationship between ancient Biblical history and our contemporary history? Is Biblical Israel the same as the contemporary State of Israel? What is the

meaning of the promises, the election, the Covenant and in particular the 'promise and the gift of the land' to Abraham and his descendants?"

Reading the bible in the land of the bible in the reality of the 21st century needs a new contextualization. While for most Jews, the return to the Promised Land is understood as the fulfillment of the prophecies, for the local Christian the chosen people and the Promised Land are connected now to soldiers, suspicion and threat. The theoretical concept was turned into Jewish settlements and refugees.

The survey quoted above shows also how the theological aspect of the dialogue has influence on the Jewish willingness to take part in it. The study shows that negative attitudes toward Christians and Christianity are much more common among those who defined themselves as ultra Orthodox and Orthodox Jews (observant). The explanation can be found in the traditional Jewish religious attitude towards the Christian faith, formed under the circumstances of the past, yet influence the present. In Muslim Jewish relations, this theological aspect doesn't exist, due to a totally different attitude towards the Muslim faith.

Solution through Dialogue

The Lack of opportunities for encounter, ignorance and the historical and political circumstances lead to negative attitudes, stereotypes and mistrust between Arab Christians and Israeli Jews. Yet the difficulties which I mentioned should not discourage us from seeking solutions through education and dialogue. The premise for such encounters must be willingness to listen, to understand and to respect. Both sides, Christian Arabs and Jews have to search for the common values to be appreciated, but at the same time to explore the differences and to respect them.

All of us here in this conference share a common goal: to strengthen the Christians in the Holy land and to secure their future. The presence of "The Living Stones" is as important as every other component of the varied multicultural society of the holy Land. Tomorrow we will discuss ways to promote this goal in a more practical way. For today I would just like to emphasize the importance of the inter-religious relations to the future of our region. The presence of Jews and Muslims presenting their points of view here reflects this understanding.

As a Jewish Israeli woman I feel the responsibility to lead a dialogue in order to educate our young generation. I believe that the morality of a society is measured by the way it treats minorities, and while Jews were the fragile minority in the past, today in Israel it is our responsibility as the majority to ensure justice for all.

The dialogue should always be bilateral: Jews should learn and respect the Christian minorities in the Holy Land just as well as Christians should be able to listen and learn about their neighbors. It wasn't until Daniel Rossing Z"L (of blessed memory), who was the head of the Christian communities department in the ministry of religions in the 70s and 80s, that this subject was approached with great seriousness. In 2004 he established the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Christian Relations, where I have the privilege to work, an organization that promotes peace through programs designed to overcome ignorance and prejudice and to foster understanding and empathy between Jews and Christians in Holy Land. In this organization we try to educate and create opportunities to meet and learn about each other.

The dialogue between Christians and Jews in the Holy Land is essential not only for Christians to better understand their roots or to bridge the gap of years of conflict during the last 2000 years. The Dialogue in Israel strives to create a better life for the people who live there, to enable a peaceful coexistence in a tolerant, just, respectful and understanding atmosphere for our own future.