

Lubna Alzaroo

Lambeth Palace Speech

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Lubna Alzaroo was raised most of my life in a city south of Bethlehem named Hebron where my ancestors can trace their roots back to a thousand and five hundred years at least. I have 3 sisters and one brother. I was born during the first Intifada in 1989 in Bethlehem. Despite being born there, I never entered Bethlehem again until I took the entrance exam for Bethlehem University in August 2008.

Hebron as some may know, is the only major Palestinian city with no Palestinian Christians in it. The only Christian presence is an Orthodox Russian church in the middle of town that up until 2005 I had no idea existed. There is also a Christian elementary school with all Muslim students and mostly Muslim staff. I never knew this school existed until I was 8 and was coming back for a summer holiday from the UK.

When did I become aware of the existence of Christianity and other religions then? That is a question I have been thinking about for a while now. I have come to the conclusion that it was most likely at the age of 5 and a half when my father moved us to the UK to go to graduate school. Despite meeting Americans before, nothing but the difference in appearance had ever registered with me. It was when I finally moved out of Hebron for the first time and entered the UK, that I realized that rather than mosques on every corner there were churches, with people who would go in them and pray. But I noticed that the way they prayed is different than the way we prayed - that they didn't fast in Ramadan for example.

I think I must have asked my parents about it and they must have explained how Christianity is different from Islam. During their explanation I believe they must have mentioned that Christians are not only Europeans but that there were also Christians who are Palestinians. Palestinian Christians... Who are they? What language do they speak? How do they dress? How do they get married? Do they look like me? Those questions and many more I wondered about for many years.

The really bizarre thing I realized in my reflections while writing this speech was that I never actually met a Palestinian Christian until I was 18 years old. As I said, when I was 5 and a half, my family moved to the UK so that my father could go to graduate school and complete his Doctorate in Vocational training and education. I never met a Palestinian Christian in the UK. In 1999 we moved back to Hebron and soon after we moved back, the second Intifada started. This meant, among other things, that going to Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah and other cities where you could find a Christian community became very difficult.

Therefore for 8 years I had to do with my father's answers to my questions about Palestinian Christians but they were usually very brief. The only thing I can remember really of his answers was describing Palestinian Christians as peaceful, "They are peaceful" he said "They don't get into stupid fights and arguments with people and are very respectful and respected."

That answer however was never enough for me, I didn't understand why my father tended to give the same answer to my questions about Christians. I believed he was avoiding questions when he described them as "normal." It was when I finally met a Palestinian Christian at the age of 18 that I did finally understand. He had described them as normal literally because they are normal Palestinians. They don't dress differently from Muslims except maybe that none of the women wear a scarf to cover their hair (of course, with the exception of the Sisters who teach in the schools and at Bethlehem University) They don't speak a different language than us, they speak Arabic exactly the same, and even pray in Arabic. They look the same, with dark skin tones and wide brown eyes. Their family relationships are also not different than ours. We share the same culture, the same background. We even share the same suffering. What happens to me on a checkpoint also happens to a Christian Palestinian girl on a checkpoint. The only difference between us was that we believe in different faith traditions and that didn't really affect our conversations at all.

I am ashamed to say that the first time I met a Palestinian Christian, the first time I was aware of it, and actually talked to her was not in Palestine, but at a program in the United States.

A year later I was attending Bethlehem University, a Catholic university, a place I never thought I would go to for school — and now I am starting my senior year there! So far, attending Bethlehem University has been one of the most gratifying experiences in my life. Bethlehem University has truly changed me. I went in as an awkward teenager full of self consciousness, feeling stupid most of the time, not knowing much about the larger Palestinian community out there and the diversity and pluralism that exists in its midst despite being quite knowledgeable about the international community, even at my young age. Now entering my senior year, I believe I am a confident young woman, who thinks she is intelligent but more importantly feels it and is quite aware of the Palestinian community with its good but also with its problems and issues.

I was looking at Hebron on Wikipedia the other day and it had on it that in 1967 a hundred and six Christians lived in the city itself. Today like I said, there are no Christians who live in Hebron. This has affected the 500,000 inhabitants in the Hebron district who have no direct interactions anymore with this significant part of our society. Hebron is known now to be the most conservative city in the West Bank. People can be very conservative there to the extent of not accepting the differences of other and partially I think the reason is the lack of religious pluralism there. Many people in Hebron

don't interact with other Palestinians who are just like them, but who differ in religion. Thus, the people there as a result become more isolated and think their way is the only way and become more closed minded.

I have two sisters, Asia and Ikhlas, aged 7 and 8, who have lived their whole lives in Hebron. The only times they go out of Hebron is to visit me in Bethlehem. They first met a Christian when I was a freshman at Bethlehem University. The first question they asked my friend was "why don't you wear a head scarf like Lubna?" In the past year discussions with them have become more interesting about this topic. I have also been living the past year with 4 Italian Nuns. On one of the visits of Ikhlas and Asia to my sleeping quarters with the Nuns, they asked me why the Nuns were wearing the white robes, why they had a chapel inside the dorm, why they prayed differently than us? These questions have led to interesting discussions with them about the existence of multiple religions in the world, multiple ways of doing things and multiple opinions - discussions I don't really think they could even comprehend if they hadn't been exposed to the Nuns and my Palestinian Christian friends. I doubt these discussions would have really come up before they were 18, and I thank God for placing me at Bethlehem University, because otherwise I would have stayed in Hebron and I doubt they would have ever learnt about the existence of pluralism in our society or worse they could have been given a misunderstood version of what people think Christianity and Christians in Palestine are. One thing I have learnt while living in Bethlehem the last 3 years and is really my message to you here today is that the Christian community in Palestine is diminishing each day. More and more Christians are immigrating and never coming back due to various reasons some of which are political, economical, but also social. The ancient Christian community that has existed in Palestine since the birth and spread of Christianity and has been part of our cultural heritage and an integral constituent of our society is vanishing. By losing Palestinian Christians we will be losing our own people and the ramifications of that will be as catastrophic to Palestine as much as the Nakba in 1948 has been. I truly hope that we can all work on changing that reality because as Martin Luther King Jr said "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."