

## **The Church and Contemporary Conflict**

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Fuad FARAH,  
Nazareth

Before we indulge into the subject of Church involvement in conflict situations, it is imperative that one should seek to examine first the true nature and essence of our Christian faith.

I must admit first that I am not a theologian nor a theology student. Never had I the experiences of going into detailed interpretation or sharing in controversies over different views in Christian thought. Nevertheless, I endeavour to apprehend Christian ideology and teachings in the same manner conveyed to the early disciples, the fishermen of Galilee, who were totally uneducated in religious matters and unexposed to the philosophic ideas of the age.

To my mind, the peaceful love sharing, the grace, compassion and hope preached by Jesus Christ along the shores of Galilee present not only the true spirit of our Christian faith but also its basic philosophy, whereas His ordeal, crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem were to complete His mission of sacrifice and triumph over death.

One of the most outstanding features of Christianity is its universalism, and although Jesus proclaimed that He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it, one cannot but notice the sharp differences of concept between the Old and New Testaments. For the Hebrews, God is not only keen to protect His people but also to lead them to military victory over their enemies. In their eyes He is their political and war strategist – sending the plague to Egypt, felling the walls of Jericho and holding the sun for Saul to finish up his enemies. In general He is a god of the sword, punitive and sometimes can be merciless against those who deny Him. In return He demands worship sacrifice and full obedience to the letter of the Law, otherwise His wrath was forthcoming, yet, in the words of a different strand of prophets, in another context, God's followers are asked to do justice, love of mercy, not to oppress the stranger, the fatherless and the widow. His kingdom is earthly; He promises and allocates for His chosen people a national home and instructs them to kill and expel those already living there simply because they denied Him.

Now comes Jesus with a totally different concept. In Matthew 5:44 He sets up the doctrine "Love thy enemies, bless them that curse thee, do good to them that hate thee and pray for them which despitefully use thee and persecute thee. That thou may be the children of thy Father in the Heavens. For He maketh the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." On more than one occasion Jesus asserts the heavenly rather than the earthly nature of His mission, "My kingdom is not of this world" and "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's". The war-cries of the Israelites in the Old Testament suddenly vanish, peacemakers are not good and righteous people but they are endowed with the high honour of being children of God, in a sense equal to himself as the Son of God. As Christians, we are called upon to forgive those who trespass against us. Love is

the keynote in the teachings of Jesus repeated perhaps more frequently than any other word in the gospel. God is kind, merciful and forgiving. In Matthew 9:13 Jesus emphatically declares " I will have mercy and not sacrifice, for I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance".

For once, there is no more gentile and Jew, nor a promised land and a chosen people. There is no more mention of a national home or a preferred race: a Samaritan rather than a Jew was chosen to symbolise compassion, charity and universal equality in the eyes of God.

For most of us especially those who are not well versed in theological interpretations, there seem to be contradictions that are hard to bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Misinterpreting the scripture, many Christians are inclined to support Zionist claims to sovereignty over Palestine because of biblical prophecies, believing that by so doing they will be fulfilling the will of God and bringing closer the second coming of Jesus. Some churches especially in the USA do see in the political state of Israel created in 1948, a step towards the fulfilment of God' s work of redemption and argue that the Jewish population of our days are the chosen people of God. The supreme tragedy is that in doing so, Christianity's precepts of brotherly love, charity, human dignity and justice are all being desecrated as Moslem and Christian Palestinians were forced out of their homes, deprived of their rights to return or otherwise subjected and reduced to second class citizens.

Many Christian ideologists are advocating the view that in the Old Testament, the reference in effect is made to a spiritual kingdom for all mankind and not to the political state of Israel that occupies territories and homes belonging to another people, and that the modern secular Israel in this sense is confused with the Israel of God. The Church, rather than the Jews, is the Israel referred to in the bible and intended for the whole world, and that the true people of God are the true believers from all nations and races wherever they may be. Others quote Isaiah in their endeavour to nullify the gross misinterpretation of the Bible "For out of Zion shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord. from Jerusalem". The reference is to the teachings of Christ from Jerusalem. On the other hand, were not these divine promises given to Abraham "Unto thy seed will I give this land " Genesis 12:7 inevitably including the Arabs who claim direct descent from Abraham through his son Ishmail.

God's purpose as conveyed in the New Testament is to set forth the creation of fellowship of people transcending all distinctions of race and nationality and cannot therefore be identified, or in this sense confused, with any existing or future political state. Paul was very clear in this regard. In his letters to the Galatians, chapter 3 verse 26-29 he writes: "For all ye are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. For whatsoever ones of you were baptized into Christ, did put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor freed man neither male nor female. For all ye are one in Christ Jesus. If ye are of Christ, indeed ye are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise". This is the true Israel of God, made up of people Jews and gentiles alike, not a geographical, ethnical or political entity but as the body of all believers.

The long agonising Palestine conflict is a flagrant example of how religious slogans and gross misinterpretations are put into use serving political ends. From this point of view, it might be sacrilegious to think that this seemingly blessed sanctity of

Palestine in the eyes of Christians, Moslems and Jews has been in effect a source for much hardships and bloodshed for its population, or else why would the Crusades launch a ravaging campaign in the name of the cross leaving behind them nothing but ruins, hatreds and a desire for vengeance which was directed against the innocent local Christians, or why would the Jews insist on their return to Palestine starting a conflict which no one can predict how it is going to end. If religion has been the curse of the Irish, as Katheline Kennedy puts it, it seems doubly true as far as the Christians here are concerned.

Jesus has emphatically stressed “For all that take the sword shall perish by the sword”. Yet the Church from its outset has been deeply involved in political conflicts, wars and bloodshed. This is not of course the Church that Jesus intended it to be built on the rock such that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, but in fact it is the Holy Establishment, the religious hierarchy, and the well organised mechanism run by ordained ministers and priests who claim for themselves the right to rule over our spiritual needs and souls. Orthodoxy defines the Church as a group of believers gathered around a priest with whom they share church secrets, and theologian according to St. Gregorios is any one who prays devoutly. The principle lies therefore in sharing and in devotion rather than creating a self centred body of theologians who do not relate enough to the spiritual needs of the parish community.

The deep involvement of the Church in state affairs has lead to divisions, rivalries, persecutions and even bloodshed and wars among the different Christian factions almost throughout its history. Since Constantine’s conversion and his recognition of Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century, the Byzantine emperors claimed to rule by divine right and to serve as spokesmen of Heaven's will. The Byzantine throne sought to dominate both church and state perhaps as a tradition of the pagan emperors of Rome, or may be as a strong unifying force for the diversity of peoples within the Empire. This completed the modelling the church structure on that of the state. If it were to remain true to its doctrines, Christianity could not fully merge itself with the State.

The fact that Christianity became the official faith of the Empire meant that the State had a vital interest and concern in defining and preserving Church dogma, hence the need for the ecumenical councils, summoned by the Emperor himself, to debate doctrinal disputes threatening to lead to serious disturbances of peace and the unity of the State. Racial disputes set back the background for sharp differences in dogma fostered by the wishes of the different national groups within the Empire to separate from Byzantium, and when the time came they gladly surrendered to the Moslem invaders to escape persecution at the hands of the Byzantines for adhering strongly to their own version of Christian dogma. Another example of Church and State relationship which negatively affected church mission was the war of the Crusades. This mainly politically and commercially motivated war, manifested as a desire on the part of the Church to protect Christian interests in the Holy Land, not only put an end almost to the tranquil peaceful coexistence between Moslems and Christians here but also added much to the already deteriorating relationship between the Eastern and Western Churches. Establishing the Latin Churches on the ruins of the Eastern Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch, as well as the occupation of Constantinople and its merciless pillage at the hands of the Crusades has wiped out any hope of reconciliation between the two halves of Christendom, leading eventually to the final collapse of Byzantium at

the hands of the Turks. The historical implementation of the idea of a theocratic state, inherited from Rome and given a Christian form by Byzantium lasted until 1918 when the Russian Tsar was killed by the Bolsheviks. Ardashir, the great Sassanid king has been quoted as saying to his son at his death bed “State and religion are brothers and one can do nothing without the other”. This was perhaps the concept of rulers until democracies in our modern times put an end to Church meddling in State affairs.

The Pope and cardinals in Rome exercised tremendous power over kings and rulers of Medieval Europe, and the church played an important role in the political events of the Middle Ages. It was an establishment that had to be reckoned with, and in many cases even to comply to its demands in matters of public affairs. Then came the reformation and central and northern Europe sank to their knees in bloody turmoil over questions of Christian dogma and differences of views. Wars, persecutions and massacres, like the Huguenots in France, were carried out ironically in the same name of the Cross. The Catholic Church split into fragments and different factions in Western Europe and the USA, such that today there are more than 2600 Christian groups in the world each claiming to be the way to salvation. To some people pluralism in the Church is a healthy phenomenon indicative of democratic expression of freedom of thought. This might be true provided it is all kept under control within the framework of a common basic faith.

Today, Church involvement in state affairs is of a negligible extent in contrast to its long lasting place as a world power. No more theocratic states or emperors who rule by divine power. In the USA there are strictly observed legislations curbing any intervention of church groups in public affairs of a political nature. In Western democracies Churches cannot any more meddle in state affairs. On the other hand there is a growing awareness of the Church’s important role as patron of the poor and the needy, fighting misery and injustice and supporting human rights issues – in brief, going back to the roots. The liberation theology movements are good examples of the new attitudes the church leaders are now assuming.

Unfortunately, the winds of reform have not reached our shores yet. The archaic structure of our churches on the whole has not changed - a closed in, self-centred establishment composed of mostly foreign ecclesiasts having full control of all church assets, refusing to report or to be held accountable for their doings and not concerned enough with the problems of the parish community. The result, a highly volatile feelings of suspicions, none confidence and alienations that may lead to undesired consequences in the already tense relationship between the religious leadership in the Church and the community.

One of the most outstanding events throughout the history of the Church was the rise and fall of communism. For over seventy years the Church in communist ruled countries was kept at bay, deprived of its long cherished privileges and forced to limit its activities. The leftist movements in other parts of the world adopted a strong anti-church attitude as well. This was perhaps a strong reaction, particularly in Russia, against the once growing power of the Holy Establishment and its deep involvement in palace affairs. It was the greatest challenge the Church faced in its entire history which threatened its very existence in large parts of the globe. Besides their strong ideological stand against religion, communist leaders were convinced that they should be curbing the all powerful grasp of .the ecclesiasts not only over the souls of their followers but

also in many cases over their daily needs, if they wanted to remain in power. Churches, theological seminaries and schools were closed, mission work prohibited, church activists either imprisoned or banished and believers who dared to speak out were persecuted. Statements like “religion is the opium of the people”, uttered by communism's greatest leader Lenin, spread like fire throughout the world. It was a situation never experienced before by the Church, remindful of what the early Christians had to go through during the time of pagan Rome. Many feared the fate of the Church as new anti Christ, government-backed, ideologies began to spread replacing the long entrenched Christian teachings and philosophy. Yet the spark of the faith, was kept aglow in the hearts of the people and the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail it was fulfilled.

Communism with its strong materialism rather than spiritualism was not the only challenge, though it was the greatest, that the contemporary Church had to face. The love for all, neighbour and enemy, is being challenged now by narrow nationalistic and fundamentalist ideas and thoughts. Inter-religious as well as interdenominational conflicts which the Church finds itself helplessly involved in as in the past are still a cause of great agony, misery and hardships for large segment of the Christian world. Moslems, Christians and Jews are engaged in open conflict in several parts of the world. Catholics are fighting Protestants in Northern Ireland, and Orthodox Serbs are engaged in a bloody war against Moslem Bosnians and Catholic Croatians in former Yugoslavia. Religious fundamentalism seems to be in the rise in trouble spots. This new pattern of extremism can take different forms. Protestant Fundamentalists for example in their desire for certainty take an all or nothing stance in their literal interpretation of the Holy Gospel with total disregard of the context, the metaphor or the impossible task of putting divine reality in human speech. In this sense they support Jewish Fundamentalism as we have seen before in their claim over the whole of Palestine even at the cost of alienating the Moslem Arab population against their Christian Arab brethren who could be erroneously associated with Christian Fundamentalist thought and who, being also Arabs, are denied any right on this land. On- the other hand Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East and North Africa is an outcome of the inability of the modern secular systems in the Moslem world to solve the deep political, social and economic problems of the masses in their respective countries. Moslem fundamentalists are therefore intent on changing the system and seizing power by means of acts of violence, armed revolt, agitation and terror. Poverty, social injustice, oppression and continued politic unrest form good breeding ground for the spread of Islamic extremism. Blaming Israel and Western imperialism for their plight, Islamic fundamentalists are sworn anti-Western activists directing their enmity at Western interests which in turn is targeted against Christianity erroneously identified with Western culture. They can be of extreme danger to world peace and to Western democracies once they are in possession of means of mass destruction. This might be the major challenge facing the Church today once the danger of Communist take over has subsided, or may be faded away.

The twentieth century has been witness to fantastic scientific achievements never paralleled in the whole history of the human race. Intensive industrialisation, mass media and urbanism accounting to about 80% of the world population, has brought people closer together. Encounter has fostered confrontation and created serious social problems like drug use, AIDS and organised crime especially among the youth, within the city population. Here is again another challenge that confronts the contemporary

Church, requiring it to penetrate deeply into the hard core of this human tragedy, rather than shutting itself up in its cloisters, cathedrals and chapels. Furthermore, and stemming out of its Christian principles, duty and ideology, the Church should take a staunch stand against any injustice, disregard of human rights and oppression of any kind. It takes more than praying for the dead, the imprisoned, the refugee and the persecuted to prove Church's credibility in fighting the desecration of man born in the image of God.

Never before since the great schism of 1054 were the churches so close in their eagerness to work for a common purpose. The ecumenical movement, characteristic of our age, is regarded by many as a revolutionary step in church relations. This is also another challenge where Church leaders will have to work out a basis for better cooperation among the churches, taking into consideration that this matter is extremely delicate and has to be dealt with as such.

There is also the question of Christian presence in the Holy Land, expressed in the existence of Christian communities with a long tradition of Christian witness, certainly the longest. It will seem incredible - that the cradle of Christianity where Jesus lived, taught, was crucified and rose from the dead, be void of Christians. Let us not forget that kingdoms of Western Europe were ready to wage wars in order to protect Christian interests here. Religious festivities carried out by the local churches are followed with great interest and have a special impact on the many pilgrims who come especially to attend them and on millions all over the world to whom they are broadcasted. It is only natural that Christians wherever they are have a strong sentimental affinity towards their brethren in the Holy Land whose place in their hearts ought to be similar to what Mecca means for the Moslems or Jerusalem for the Jews.

Future prospects do not seem bright for the Christians of the Holy Land and many close observers view with great concern Christian presence here under the present circumstances, considering that this should be looked upon within the concept of a prosperous coherent society rather than church buildings and shrines guarded as they are now by foreign clergy. In the first place concern is expressed over their steadily decreasing number in regard to the total population. In 1947 Christians made up about 7.5% of the population, whereas their percentage now does not exceed 2%. A further decline is expected due to Jewish immigration, and to the relatively high birth-rate of the Moslems. A most disturbing phenomenon, however, is the steadily increasing number of Christian émigrés to the West. In analysing the reasons behind that one cannot but notice a general feeling of mistrust, dissatisfaction, bitterness and hopelessness among the usually moderate Christians in relation to escalating radicalism within the Jewish and the Islamic population. Small minorities are especially vulnerable under conditions of continued turmoil and conflict which has been the case here in the past fifty years. Other reasons for their frustration is the attitude of most churches who are supposed to form a linking bond, create a sense of belonging and extend a helping hand out of the vast resources and influence they exercise especially abroad. As disputes are widening between the church hierarchy and its lay followers, church credibility in the eyes of the Christian community is at a low ebb, expecting its leaders who are mostly foreign to be more concerned with their problems and ready to share with them in a common effort towards finding a solution within the means at their disposal. Christians rightly believe and firmly assert that the main concern of the Church leadership in the Holy Land is their narrow interests of guarding their rights in the holy

shrines against the intrusion of rival Christian churches with, minimum involvement in the spiritual as well as the social needs of their followers, the living stones of the Holy Land. Brother Joseph, former rector of Bethlehem University, accuses church leaders here of putting more effort catering for visiting pilgrims than for the local believers.

Unlike the Jewish and Moslem population, Christians of the Holy Land are practically cut off from the centres of Christendom. There are almost no expressions of solidarity, nor of willingness to foster stronger relationship or create some sort of fellowship and cooperation at the grass roots. They are convinced, perhaps rightly so, that they are being neglected altogether not only by their religious leadership here but also by their fellow Christians abroad. Church world leaders and organisations ought to be aware of their responsibilities in preserving Christian witness in the Holy Land uninterrupted for the past 2000 years. They, especially Orthodoxy considering that the Orthodox Community is most neglected though it is the largest Christian community here, are called upon to meet this challenge by involving themselves more in their problems before it becomes too late to be able to do something.

The question of Jerusalem and the Christian interests in it is likely to be put on the agenda of the negotiating parties soon. We are deeply concerned that the talks, in the absence of local Christian representatives, will centre primarily around such items as free access to the Holy places and the taxing of Church property, without looking into the matter of taking measures to assure the continued survival of Christian communal presence, now at stake, in it. At the same time the dispute inside the churches between the upper hierarchy and the lay community should also be solved through the intervention of those who care.

Middle East history is witness to several religions, civilisations, racial groups, and especially ethnic minorities who have ceased to exist under such circumstances, and observers believe that if no immediate measures are taken, Christian presence in the Holy Land will be heading, God forbid, to eventual extinction.

To sum up, misinterpreting the Old Testament out of its context by some Church leaders to serve political ends and for the purpose of supporting territorial national claims against the rights of others, is contradictory to the spirit of universalism, charity for all, and the concept of heavenly kingdom so well expressed in Christ's teachings. This is perhaps a modern version of political involvement of the Church in state affairs which has led, as in the past, to tragic consequences and bloody conflicts. The politically tainted Church ever since the early Christian era and throughout the Middle Ages, is giving way now to a more humane approach and is less reluctant to involve itself in state affairs. Communism and leftist ideologies which until recently posed a serious threat for the Church has now faded away. New challenges - Religious fundamentalism, social problems, ecumenism and the struggle for human rights are the main subjects the Church has to deal with presently. With its archaic set up, its inability to adapt to the current situation, its failure to function satisfactorily in responding to human needs, as well as its isolation from the lay believers at the parishes, the Jerusalem Church is close to loosing its credibility and is certainly in no position to help in averting the serious dangers confronting the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Let us all join together in an earnest prayer for God's peace on earth and to the glory of His name.