Nationalism and the Church: Christian Nativism and Politics in Early-Modern Palestine-Israel

SAMUEL J. KURUVILLA

University of Kerala

Palestine is known as the birthplace of Christianity. However, the Christian population of this land is relatively insignificant today, despite the continuing institutional legacy that the 19th-century Western missionary focus on the region created. Palestinian Christians were often forced to employ politically astute and theologically radical means to appear relevant as a minority community within a majority Muslim society. This article deals with the historical and political issues that have affected Palestinian Christians over the years and the steps taken by them to ensure their survival as a culturally and religiously distinct community in Jerusalem within the Palestinian-Israeli framework.

Keywords Christianity, Islam, Nationalism, Greek Orthodox, Latin Catholic

As it was known in the religious terminology, Jerusalem (Al-Quds), 'the City of God', was an important centre since David's capture of it from the Jebusites in approximately 1000 BCE.[1] It symbolised Jewish hopes for a homeland since the dispersion and a great pilgrimage centre for both Christians and Muslims. Since the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587, the city was ruled by countless non-Jewish regimes right up to 1948. Its importance as a Christian pilgrimage centre began with the almost mythical journey of the mother of Emperor Constantine, Queen Helena, from the imperial capital of Byzantium to Jerusalem to identify the essential sites of the crucifixion and resurrection. It was as a result of this journey that Constantine authorised the building of the most famous Church in Jerusalem, namely the *Anastasis* (also known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Westerners or the Church of the Resurrection to local Arabs) in AD 335 (Wasserstein, 2002). Christian shrines and institutions multiplied during the roughly three hundred years of Byzantine Christian rule in the Holy City so that by the time of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, the city had been transformed into a Christian city with representation from almost all parts of the Romano-Christian world. Palestinian Aramaic and Byzantine Greek were the predominant languages used in the Holy Land during the early Byzantine era. It was interesting to note, in this context, that for the present-day 'Greek' Orthodox clerical hierarchy of the Holy Land, the local 'Arab' Orthodox laity was often referred to and considered as Arabic-speaking Greeks. The implication was, therefore, that the local population of Palestinian Christians were Greek in origin and could legitimately be ruled over by an ecclesiastical hierarchy comprised almost exclusively of Greeks priests, monks and bishops from Cyprus, Greece and the Aegean islands (Anton & Young, 1926).

Arrival of Islam

Islamic Jerusalem or *Al-Quds* derived its legitimacy from its identification with *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* (The Further Mosque), considered the place where the Prophet Mohammed was carried on his night journey from Mecca (Wasserstein, 2002). Muslim conceptions about the holiness of Jerusalem resulted in the building of impressive Mosques and the endowments of *Waqfs* (Muslim religious trusts) all over the city, particularly on the elevated platform that had once held the Jewish Temples. This building project would prove fatal for the later peace of the Holy City as an area that had been historically avoided by Christians as undeserving of any sanctity was subsequently pushed into the focal point of conflict among all the three main Abrahamic faiths. Many of the greatest works of Islamic architecture surviving from the early Islamic *Umayyad* period, such as the Dome of the Rock (*al-Haram al-Sharif*) on the Temple Mount, could not have been built without the expertise and help of Byzantine

[1] David's capture of the city of Jerusalem was detailed in 2 Samuel 6:6-10. Also see 1 Chronicles 11:1-9; 1 Chronicles 14:1-7.

Christian craftsmen; some possibly attracted to come from the Byzantine capital Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) itself (Cragg, 1992).

The arrival of Islam in the Levant resulted in a radical change for the Christian communities of Palestine as they lost legal ownership over all the religious buildings and institutions that they had accumulated during the previous three centuries. As the second 'hegemonic' monotheistic faith to emerge in the Middle East after Byzantine-Roman oriented Christianity, Islam held that legal and jurisdictional ownership over all religious buildings and institutions-*Waqf* (religious endowments) of all faiths within the territories under the banner of the crescent belonged to the state. As a result, the Islamic State possessed the 'sovereign' and indisputable right to close, allocate or confiscate religious buildings within their dominions at will. Such buildings could not be repaired and rebuilt without prior permission. The construction of entirely new Churches within the province of Islam was challenging to achieve indeed. In pursuit of this policy, Saladin closed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Church of the Resurrection) in 1187 till he could decide to which Christian faction; he could present the keys of the Church. Much of the struggles between the various Christian factions over status, position and ownership in the Holy Places can be traced not only as a result of the real rivalry between the different Christian groupings but also to the apprehensions about the legal status of their positions and properties under Islam (O' Mahoney, 1993).

Christianity in Israel during the Crusades

The Crusader rule of Jerusalem saw the widespread rebuilding and beautification of the city of Jerusalem, with a significant increase in properties owned by the Latin (Roman) Catholic Church (Wasserstein, 2002). The Crusader era also saw the displacement of the Byzantine Greek Patriarch in favour of the Rome supported Latin Patriarch in 1099 (Colbi, 1980). The former returned with the re-conquest of Saladin. Saladin (*Salah-al-Din*), the great Kurdish-Egyptian warrior, was the nemesis of the Western Crusaders for many years and the person who ultimately and decisively defeated the Frankish armies of the Crusaders at the Horns of Hattin in 1187 AD. 1187 AD was also the date when Saladin captured Jerusalem from the Crusaders. History records that Saladin did not repeat the mistake of the Crusaders in committing mass slaughter in the city of Jerusalem. He instead provided the option for the defeated Crusader knights and their followers and the clerical, monastical and lay representatives of the Roman Church to leave the city in peace after paying the necessary tribute and ransoms. Saladin's rule was again beneficial to the Eastern Christian communities, which could reinstate their privileges lost during the years of Western Crusader rule. The departure of the Latins was followed by the arrival of the Byzantine-sponsored Greek Patriarch to take up his old, forfeited seat in Jerusalem. Saladin was particularly generous to the Eastern Christian representatives, having long noted the emerging and deep schism between Eastern and Western Christians in the Mediterranean region.

Eastern Christians had served on both sides of the Saracen-Crusader divide, and they had fared little better, if not worse, under the Western Crusaders than under the Islamic regime preceding them. After all, the Crusaders utterly refused to distinguish between Jew, Eastern Christian, and Moslems in their initial conquest of the city of Jerusalem, massacring all indiscriminately in a bloodbath so epochal that it was still remembered with popular revulsion in the Arab Levantine consciousness and enshrined in their folklore. Eastern Christians found themselves side-lined under the Crusader regime, whether Byzantine Greeks and Arabs, Syrians, Armenians, Copts or Ethiopians. This Crusader policy was fraught from the very start, as local Christians had formed a majority of the native population in Palestine and neighbouring Syria before and after their invasion of the area.

Among the Eastern Christians, the Maronites alone succeeded in establishing a lasting relationship with the Crusaders that culminated in being formally accepted into communion with the Latin Church just before the fall of the last Crusader 'kingdom' of Acre, on the coast of Palestine, in 1291. While some Christians (Syrian Maronites and Armenians), particularly those situated along the mountain and coastal route the Crusaders had to take to reach Jerusalem from northern Syria (Antioch and Tripoli) aided the Latins in their journey to the 'holy city,' many became quickly disillusioned with their refusal to reinstall the traditional Byzantine clergy in the territories conquered by them from the Moslem rulers. It was the Crusader interlude that sounded the death knell of the 'majority' Christian populations of the Syrian Levant and of Palestine. Native Syrian Christians never recovered their 'loyalty' in the eyes of their fellow Moslem brethren and rulers, thereby exposing them to intense pressure to convert to Islam after the final departure of the Latin Crusaders from Palestinian and Syrian soil. The Christian proportion of the population of these regions started to fall drastically after the Crusader era (Mansour, 2004). The loss of Jerusalem by the Crusaders in 1187 resulted in the gradual restriction of European Christian possessions in Palestine to the coastal strip, ultimately culminating in the successful Arab and Muslim siege of the last Crusader stronghold of Acre in 1270 (Cragg, 1992). The Third Crusade failed to recover Jerusalem and Pope Innocent III authorised the Fourth Crusade that, instead of attacking Palestine and Jerusalem, besieged and occupied Constantinople, thereby inaugurating Latin rule there from 1204 to 1261. No other Crusade succeeded in capturing or retaining Jerusalem for the Western Latins, thereby leaving it to St. Francis of Assisi to cement a bond of trust with Saladin's successors (such as his nephew, Al-Malik al-Kamil in July 1219), that would ensure the insertion of his Franciscan friars into the pilgrim towns of Palestine to safeguard Western Latin interests (Cragg, 1992).

The Arrival of Western Missions

From 1250 till about 1675, the Orthodox Patriarch was back in Jerusalem before departing again for Istanbul until the middle of the Nineteenth century. In contrast, the so-called Latin Patriarchate was based in Rome from the fall of the Crusader kingdoms till about 1847, when it was re-established in Jerusalem (O' Mahoney, 1993). This period also coincided with the start of the Protestant mission to the Holy Land and the inauguration of the short-lived Anglo-Prussian Bishopric as a result of the early pioneering work of the joint Church Missionary Society-CMS and Lutheran mission in Palestine. It was the Anglicans who showed the first expression of interest in establishing a Protestant mission in Palestine. The Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) had plans to establish a permanent mission post in the city of Jerusalem as early as 1821. The London Jewish Society (J.L.S.), the forerunner of the later CMJ-Church Mission to the Jews, also had an early interest in the Holy Land from the point of view of converting Palestinian Jewry to Protestant Christianity. The Western Protestant organisations had to wait till the capture of Jerusalem by Mohammad Ali of Egypt in 1831 before they were allowed to enter and establish a permanent mission in 1833. The first British Consul took residence in Jerusalem in 1838 and the first Protestant bishopric was established in Jerusalem under joint British and Prussian supervision in 1841.

Given the fact that the Church of England was an Episcopal one and the established Lutheran Church in Prussia was not, it was mutually agreed between these Churches that the Bishop in Jerusalem would be an Anglican chosen by rotation from the Anglican and Prussian sides. It was not until 1845 that the first Anglican Church in the city, Christ Church on Jaffa Road, was dedicated (O' Mahoney, 1993). These two nationally supported mission organisations later agreed to split their work in the Holy Land mutually, thereby giving rise to the two separate Anglican and Lutheran dioceses currently present in Israel-Palestine. The Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) and the Berlin Missionary Association were supported by Great Britain and Prussia (later the Bismarck-unified Germany) respectively as the respective national and established Church missionary organisations of each major European state. The so-called dual bishopric split in 1881. It was estimated that by the

1880s, there were over a hundred schools and educational institutions belonging to various mission organisations in the Holy Land. These schools were attended by pupils belonging to all the communities in Palestine.

As it was often a part of the role of teachers in these mission schools, which were run by the missionaries themselves, to engage in proselytisation, the school and orphanage movement directly resulted in the growth of various Protestant congregations in the Holy Land. This ensured that the mission organisations and, by implication, schools and charitable institutions would run afoul of the predominant Greek Orthodox Church in Palestine and the Levant (O' Mahoney, 1993). Again, so as not to run afoul of the feelings of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch and Bishops resident in the Holy Land, it had been early decided that the Anglican bishop in Jerusalem would be known under the title of the 'Bishop in Jerusalem,' instead of the usual 'Bishop of Jerusalem,' so as not to clash with the recognised Ottoman Era supreme bishopric of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem (Tsimhoni, 1993).

Despite centuries of Islamic rule, Jerusalem, unlike contemporary early Christian cities like Antioch (in today's Turkey, Antakya) and Constantinople (today's Istanbul on the Bosporus) was able, by and large, to maintain its Christian character. An obvious reason for this was the city's importance as a pilgrimage destination for European (Western) Christians through the ages (Hintlian, 2007). In addition to the not inconsiderable military power that the Europeans could focus on the Holy Land as and when they wished, the considerable revenues that the Muslim-Turkish rulers of Palestine accrued because of Christian Pilgrimages to Jerusalem convinced them of the necessity of allowing the Christian Holy Places to function without significant interruption. In this context, even the victorious return of Saladin could be seen as a justification of this policy, as he very diplomatically refused to exact tip-for-tat revenge on the Crusader occupiers of Jerusalem, offering them very favourable terms of withdrawal and ensuring that Christian holy places and historic Churches were protected, including those institutions built up during the Crusader period. Arab chroniclers had described how Crusader Jerusalem was transformed into a lovely garden city by the money and skills of the Western Franks. Local Arab tribes would have been well aware of the Europeans' wealth and the economic potential to be gained by continuing to allow pilgrim flows to Jerusalem from the West (Cragg, 1992).

Muslim and Turkish rule in Palestine: Impact on the Christians of the Holy Land

The early Arab-Muslim rulers and later Ottoman Turks gave rights of privilege and access to three main Christian groups in Jerusalem, namely the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox and the Latin Catholics, who were mainly represented since the Middle Ages by the Franciscan Order. *Rum Urthuduksiya* was the term used widely in the Ottoman Empire and even among modern Levantine Arabs to refer to the Greek Orthodox Christians of both Greek and Arab origin in their midst. The term 'Rum' and 'Rumi' obviously indicated the relationship of these people with Rome and the Western Christian world in general. A similar usage was the pejorative reference to Levantine Orthodox Christians as 'Melkites' or 'King's men,' as people still loyal to the old order of Byzantine predominance and followers of the 'Roman' Christian faith (Masters, 2001).

In 1384, it was recorded that there were seven different Christian communities' resident in the Holy Land. For geopolitical reasons, the Greek Orthodox Church managed to emerge as the pre-eminent ecclesiastical grouping among the varied Christian groups of the Holy Land. Under the 'Ecumenical' Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Greek Orthodox Church was the main and most populous Christian grouping among varied Christian and non-Christian subjects of the erstwhile Ottoman Empire. Hence it was natural for the Ottoman authorities to favour this 'home-grown' Eastern Christian group over 'foreign' Western origin Catholic and Protestant Christianity. In addition, the Ottoman Emperor, as successor to the Byzantine

Greek Emperor, was legally bound to support the Greek Orthodox Church in preference to any other in the Empire (O' Mahoney, 1993). The Byzantine Patriarch Sophronius represented the Church when the city capitulated to the Abbasid Caliph Omar in the year A.D. 637. Many Arab historians and commentators have described in close detail this meeting, which took place after the successful Abbasid campaign to conquer Palestine. Kenneth Cragg reported an interesting apocryphal story from that era that described how the Caliph Omar refused to pray within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, even when invited to do so by the Patriarch Sophronius, as he was afraid to create a situation where future Muslims would lay claim to the territory of the Church and seek to convert it into a mosque in memory of the Caliph (Cragg, 1992). A *firman* was then purported to have been obtained by the Patriarch that gave the possession and protection of the Christian Holy Places to him and his Church (Roussos, 1995). The need to come to terms with Islam resulted in a peculiar reformulation of Arabic Christianity that superseded the previous Greek form. This would result in ethnolinguistic clashes and political controversies between the Arab laity and the Greek dominated clergy that have continued to the present day (O' Mahoney, 2000).

After 1516 CE, Jerusalem became part of the Ottoman Empire, which included Constantinople (later Istanbul), taken by the Turks in 1453 CE. In his new role as successor to the title of Byzantine Emperor, the Ottoman Sultan had to contend with the various controversies and infighting of the various Christian cults of the Holy Land. The Churches tended to spend more time fighting each other than they did in countering the ruling authorities in Istanbul. The different Churches and Christian groups of Jerusalem spent most of their time poisoning the ears of the Ottoman authorities in Istanbul as regards the activities and aspirations of their rival fellow-Christian groups in the Holy City.

The two main sites that were most often fought over in Palestine were the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (The Church of the Resurrection) in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. This was in addition to the myriads of holy places spread throughout the land that were either equally revered by the different sects, religions, and groups or else were in shared custody or were either in one or other's custody, whose ownership rights and management were disputed by other religious and sectarian groups in the land. It was such inter-Church fighting that resulted in the development of the Status Quo, the set of Ottoman *firmans* that sought to lay out the agreed position with regard to inter-Church relations in Palestine (Kardus, 1929).

This gave autonomy to Christian communities and allowed them to run their own internal affairs, especially those relating to religious and civil matters. The entire period of Turkish rule lasting 400 years saw the three main churches, namely Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and the Latin Catholic, jockeying for power and recognition. The high-water mark of Catholic influence was reached in 1740 when Bourbon France managed to sign a Capitulation Treaty with the Ottomans by which the superior position of the Franciscans in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was confirmed. The other established Churches strongly opposed this position, and in 1757 a new *firman* was promulgated by Sultan Abdul Majid that saw the re-establishment of the pre-eminence of the Orthodox and created the situation which has largely continued to the present day (Colbi, 1980).

Before the Ottoman conquest of Palestine in 1517 CE, Palestinian Christians had an identity that was Arabic in their outlook and mentality. After the re-unification of the Asian Levant with Constantinople via the Ottoman Empire, the Patriarchate of Constantinople again emerged as the political centre of Orthodoxy. That meant that the Greeks again acquired supreme influence over the Jerusalem Patriarchy, as the Ottoman rulers preferred to deal with centralised authority in Istanbul than with an assortment of Patriarchs and Bishops scattered across their Empire. This induced the Orthodox Patriarchs of Jerusalem to shift their place of residence to Constantinople to be near the all-powerful Ecumenical Patriarch and his secular Greek allies (Roussos, 1995). A decree by Patriarch Germanos of

Constantinople after the Ottoman conquest of Syria, which also included Palestine, was that henceforth no native-born Syrian and by extension, any Arab Orthodox should be allowed into Orthodox monastic life, which ensured that there would be no Arab bishops in the whole of the non-Greek Levant for a period of 400 years from that date. This policy was to have grave consequences for Orthodox pastoral and communal life in Palestine (Cragg, 1992).

The rapid development of Jerusalem, as well as the other port cities of Palestine in the later Nineteenth century, ensured greater prosperity for the Christians of Palestine as they started becoming more active in the municipal affairs of various Palestinian cities and Jerusalem in particular (Masters, 2001). Christian Arabs were involved in the rise and development of Arab nationalism (Musallam, 1996). Michel Aflaq, a Syrian Christian, established the pan-Arabist *Ba'ath* (Socialist) party in Damascus that was aimed at the secular regeneration of the Arab people (Musallam, 1996). After the widespread Muslim, Turkish and Druze massacres of Christians in the Syrian Levant during the period from the 1840s to the 1860s, local Christians came to view secular, progressive and liberal 'Arab Nationalism' as the only suitable weapon in their hands against Islamic irredentism (Musallam, 1996).

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem

The Greek Orthodox Church **(**G.O.C.) had always been the oldest of Jerusalem's churches, and it was referred to as the 'mother of all churches' in the Holy Land. The Jerusalem Patriarchate traced its origins to St. James, brother of Jesus Christ. This was a practice claimed by most of the historic churches of Palestine. Most Palestinian Christians and indeed most Palestinian people today, irrespective of religious affiliation, owed their origins to the Greco-Roman Church within the early Roman Empire as well as the later Byzantine Empire. As the Greek Orthodox Church (G.O.C.) was the mother church of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, this Church became the major stakeholder in Greco-Roman Palestine (Aristarchos, 2007). It had pride of place as one of the largest and wealthiest of denominations. One of the most recent counts of Orthodox faithful in Israel, Palestine and Jordan reckoned on a population of 300,000. This would include the recent Russian-origin migrants to Israel, a good number of whom did not possess sufficient Judaic heritage and were hence seen as Orthodox.

Purely Arabic-speaking Orthodox, generally known as *Rum Urthuduksiya* (in Arabic) would number probably slightly more than 100,000 in the combined territories of the Holy Land. In the city of Jerusalem, the Church was one of the main property owners, with even the Israeli Knesset (parliament) being located on land leased from the Church (Katz & Kark, 2005). In the West Bank of Palestine and Jerusalem in particular, the Arab Orthodox had always formed the largest Christian community. The Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land (comprising Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories) was made up of 25, 30 and 15 parishes, respectively. The Church had about 100 married parish priests as well as 113 monks and bishops associated with the governing body of the Church, known as the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre (O' Mahoney, 2000).

The period of the British mandate, generally seen as the crux of all future socio-political developments in Palestine, was considered a good period for the Churches in general. A 'Christian' regime was in power for the first time in more than six hundred years. This period saw the revival of the clergy-laity controversy in the Greek Orthodox Church (G.O.C.), between the Greek and Cypriot-origin clergy and monks on one side and the Palestinian Arab laity on the other. The mandate authorities tried to keep a neutral stand but under pressure from the Hellenic Republic, seemed to favour the status quo in the holy places and the situation where the Greek origin clergy were on top (Tsimhoni, 1993).

Despite constant appeals from the 'pro-Arabist' lobby within the British establishment as well as from the prominent Arab citizenry of Palestine, the mandate authorities did not feel

the need to interfere in the status quo in the holy places. Consequently, the conditions remained as they favoured the Greeks in the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, the pre-eminent Greek monastic group in Palestine. The commission of enquiry appointed by the British mandatory high commissioner in Palestine, headed by Sir Anton Bertram and J. W. A. Young in 1924, to look into the conflict within the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, recommended modifications in the internal structure of the Patriarchate and greater participation by the Arab laity, but its recommendations were never carried out, again due to British fears about large-scale resistance from the Greek-speaking monastic fraternity within the Church.

This failure of the then Palestine government to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to the vexed issue of the Greek Orthodox Church (G.O.C.) meant that the Orthodox Arabs were forced to rely more and more on the emerging Arab national movement in the region, and to seek sympathy and collaboration with their Muslim co-nationals within Palestine, to further their aims. The fall of imperial Russia during the First World War and immediately after, meant that the Orthodox Arabs of the Levant lost their one main external patron. The Greek clerics of Palestine, meanwhile, were careful not to antagonise their British overlords while maintaining links with the Greek and Hellenistic worlds. Their support, on various occasions, for British policies in Palestine contrasted with the increasingly nationalistic overtones and approach adopted by the native Palestinian Orthodox people and leadership, and this served to further entrench the British desire not to force through a solution unacceptable to the 'Greek' Orthodox hierarchy of the Holy Land (Tsimhoni, 1993).

Israel had also sought to continue the 'status-quo' in the Holy Places. The 1990s and the mid-2000s saw major issues of disagreement breaking out between the Greek monastic community and the ethnic Arab Orthodox community as well as the Israelis on the other side over the take-over of church property in the Old City. The infamous St. John's hospice issue served to antagonise the 'Greek' Orthodox clergy and hierarchy as well as served to create a sort of temporary truce and unity between the estranged clerical and laity factions within the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land (1993). The St. John's Hospice incident and resultant revelations of the extent of Israeli government support for the settlers caused a lot of heart-searching among the church groups, particularly those that had not been averse to dealing with the State authorities in the past. That these incidents should have taken place during the Easter week of 1990, was another cause for shame and alarm. It was understood then that if the Israelis would not hesitate to conduct such outrages during a period when the attention of the worldwide Christian community was focused on Jerusalem, then there could be no time when the property and wealth of the Churches could be safe from attack and confiscation. This act of aggression against the 'status-quo' also helped to change the attitude of the clergy of the Brotherhood towards the Israeli state. After this incident, the Church was forced to take a more serious note of the nationalistic aspirations of the Palestinian people who formed the laity of the Church (Kuruvilla, 2004).

The St. John's Hospice Incident

St. John's Hospice was a building owned by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Through a series of 'offshore' transactions, Jewish settlers, aided by the State of Israel, acquired ownership of this building. It eventually emerged that *Ateret Kohanim* (Hebrew for 'Crown of the Priests,' a Zionist Jewish group primarily concerned with preparing the ground for the expected building of the third Jewish Temple on the site of the present *Al-Aqsa* Mosque), the right-wing settler group mainly based in the Old City of Jerusalem, had bought the property from a Panamanian registered company, F.D.C., Ltd. The original Jerusalem-based 'protected' lessee of the property, an Armenian

man named Mardiros Matossian, was supposed to have 'sold' it to the above-mentioned company for a huge sum, estimated to be within the range of U.S. $3.5 million to $5 million. The lessee, however, had no legal right to 'sell' the property that had been leased to him or his family by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Patriarchate thus insisted that what had transpired between Matossian and the Panamanian company was way beyond the rights invested with the former lessee of the property, who had no 'rights' to sell the leased building. The incident took place on 11th April 1990, in the middle of the Holy Week, the most important week in the Christian calendar of the Holy City. 150 armed settlers pushed their way into the St. John's Hospice building and proceeded to celebrate the Passover near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Their forceful take-over of the building accompanied by police and other security services precipitated and created a major incident in the Old City of Jerusalem and among the Christians therein. It soon transpired that the Ministry of Housing of the Government of Israel had financed this operation to the score of 40 per cent of the total budget. The deal had also been 'encouraged' by leading figures in the then Israeli administration such as the highly hawkish (and militarily notorious) former Israeli Army chief Ariel Sharon. The official government line was that the Hospice was not a holy site, and that Jews had a right to settle anywhere they wanted in the Old City of Jerusalem by legal means. The then Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, strongly objected to the development, which had apparently gone ahead without his knowledge. He argued that the sale undermined the delicate relationships between the various Old City communities and pushed Christians into further identifying with the Palestinian national struggle. While, for many Palestinians, what had happened appeared to be direct provocation on the part of the ruling authorities, the Israelis themselves seem to have misunderstood the overwhelming sensitivity of the whole issue and its ramifications for Christians worldwide.

The issue was immediately referred to the Israeli High Court of Justice, but subsequent judgements by the court in favour of evicting the settlers were never carried out thoroughly, with the matter still remaining in litigation and settlers still occupying the building, pending a verdict on its final status. The St. John's Hospice incident revealed a hitherto not often seen aspect of international politics concerning the Christians of Palestine/Israel. American politicians, Congress members and Church leaders were particularly irritated by the revelations of the extent of covert government funding for the fundamentalist Jewish group to take over the building situated right next to the Holy Sepulchre Church in the heart of the Old City. It was quickly understood from this move that any covert or, in this case rather circumstantially public action by Israel to alter the mosaic that made up Jerusalem's multi-religious character would have repercussions in the U.S. and this in turn might cast a shadow on the ability of the American state to bankroll the Jewish state. The U.S. administration under President George H. W. Bush did show its protest at the incident in the early 1990s by symbolically deducting the exact sum believed to have been allocated by the Israeli ministry of Building and Housing to the settler group for the purpose of purchasing the custodial rights over the building from the former lessee. They deducted this sum from the annual general foreign aid package to Israel (Ramon, 1997).

Greek-Palestinian Clergy-laity Issues

A peculiarity of the Greek Church was that whereas the clergy was preponderantly of Cypriot-Greek origin, the laity was Palestinian Arab in ethnicity. This was often an occasion for conflict within the Church itself. Being composed almost entirely of Greek clergy, the Church leadership had often felt that cooperation and even compromised with the ruling authorities was better to the path of confrontation followed by the Palestinian Arab laity. The Greek conception of local laity was as Arabic-speaking Orthodox, which was in keeping with the Eastern Orthodox worldview of the common Brotherhood of all people of Byzantine origin. The laity, on the other hand, were always determined to exert their identity and

separation from the Greeks as Arabs (Tsimhoni, 1993). In the early Twentieth century, there was an overwhelming demand by the local population for a greater say and control in the affairs of the Patriarchate. The laity, as loyal Palestinians, had never been able to isolate themselves from general Palestinian aspirations, which included liberation struggles against the British, partially against the Jordanians, and later, with full vigour against the Israelis. Memories of the 1948-1967 Jordanian Era certainly remained fresh in the minds of many Greeks when the Jordanians sought to indigenise the Church leadership. The Jordanians in 1958 tried to indigenise the G.O.C. leadership by passing laws that stated that the newly appointed Greek bishops had to be Jordanian citizens and conversant in Arabic while Arab bishops must be ordained and appointed to the synod of the Church.

As a result of these laws, the first-ever Arab bishop was elected to the Confraternity that controls Greek Orthodox religious interests in the Holy Land. The Greeks got around these laws by a series of diplomatic manoeuvrings, and they were quite relieved when the Israelis replaced the Jordanians as the ruling authorities in Jerusalem. The Orthodox Church in Jerusalem remained the only Church that had refused to fully or at least partially indigenise itself in accordance with ground realities. The Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, the pre-eminent Greek monastic order that controlled affairs of the Greek Church in Jerusalem was never entirely open to members of the Palestinian Arab community. The clergy were even willing to appeal to Athens to support their position vis-à-vis certain political disputes that the Church was involved in with the Israelis and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) (Wasserstein, 2001).

In fact, Orthodox Christians were often at the forefront of the nationalist struggle against the mandate and in exile as part of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (P.L.O.) and other liberation organisations. The Greek Patriarch and clergy ruling in Jerusalem and isolated within the narrow confines of the Greek-speaking Orthodox world could often not understand or empathise with such radical aspirations on the part of their laity. The laity, if allowed, would have been willing to set up an autonomous Arab Orthodox church controlled by local people, as was prevalent in other parts of the Middle East, notably Syria and Lebanon. The Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, the major Orthodox Church prevalent in Syria and Lebanon, had been able to ensure that a cleric of native Levantine Arab origin would be at its head since the late nineteenth century. This Church, as well as its sister Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, had an upper hierarchy as well as a clerical fraternity dominated by native Levantine Arabs. The status of the Jerusalem Patriarchate within the Greek world as the first Patriarchate in Christendom, older even than Constantinople, and the monastic group known as the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, always prevented the local Palestinian Arab laity from gaining control over their own Church. All these factors contributed to the Greek clergy adopting a decidedly unenthusiastic approach towards the rise of Palestinian nationalism as well as (in some cases) collaborating more than was necessary with either the Jordanians or the Israelis, who were equally, if not more willing to repress such a phenomenon (Tsimhoni, 1993).

The clergy were afraid that the development and growth of Palestinian statehood would naturally result in shifting the balance of power within the Church from the Greek side towards the native Palestinian leadership. This had always been a perennial fear of the Church, stretching right back to Ottoman times. From the time that 'Greek' ascendancy had been ensured in the Church, the Greek Orthodox Church sought to maintain this dominance by all means at her disposal, fair and foul. The self-perceived pre-eminent duty of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre, the Greek monastic order that controlled the affairs of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land, had always been to ensure that the Holy Places were open for pilgrims, Greeks and other Europeans and that religious service was conducted in Greek, the holy language of the Church.

The needs of the indigenous Christian population had always played second fiddle to these grand aspirations on the part of the foreign clergy (Roussos, 1995). It was this division between the Patriarchate and the local Arab faithful that resulted in the growth of other denominations in Palestine, in particular the Melkite Greek Catholics, the Latin (Roman) Catholics and the various Protestant groups. The Greek Catholics, also known as the 'Melkites,' or 'King's men,' from the Arabic term for King (*Malki*), formed the majority among the Christians in the state of Israel proper today, mainly based in the Galilee region, in the north of the country. Since their formation in the 18th century, they had been a Church entirely based on an indigenous clergy and hierarchy, while under the overall authority of the Vatican. The Latin and Greek Catholics in combination formed a majority of the local Christian population in the entire Holy Land. These groups had the advantage of having substantial numbers of indigenous clergy and a liturgy based on the local language as well. It is interesting to note that on the political stage in Palestine, the clergy of non-Orthodox Melkite and Uniate (Eastern Rite Churches in communion with Rome-Eastern Catholic churches that follow Orthodox liturgy) Churches had traditionally been much more active as well as pro-Palestinian while the Orthodox Churches like the Greeks and Armenians had remained reticent in this regard. This in turn had contributed to a subtle shift in the political influence of the Uniate Churches, much more than their actual strength on the ground.

Conclusion

The lack of adequate reform within the 'mother' Orthodox Church of the Holy Land forced many of this Church's members to leave and join other more progressive religious groups in Palestine. This reason was also coupled with the insistence on the Greek hierarchy within the Holy Land to protect their prerogatives, often at the expense of the welfare and legitimate aspirations of the native Arab Orthodox faithful of Palestine (Roussos, 1995). The Catholics of Palestine owe their present Patriarchal status to the Ottoman Statute of 1847 that re-established the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The Latin Catholics developed rapidly after this development and by the early mandate period had become the second-largest Christian community in the Holy Land. The end of the mandate saw the Latins poised as the community with the widest network of institutions among all the Christian Communities of Palestine.

It was only after the *Nakba* (Palestinian catastrophe of 1947-48 that saw hundreds of thousands of Arab Palestinian people driven into exile) that the indigenisation of the Latin Catholic clergy started to take effect. This was in part due to the exigencies of the new situation with an Arab nationalist government in power in Amman as well as the new guidelines that proceeded from Rome after Vatican II. Despite having a preponderance of Arab parish priests since the middle of the twentieth century, the Latin Patriarchate had to wait till 1987 for a native Palestinian (albeit a heavily Europeanised Michel Sabbah). As in the case of the Greeks, the popular demand for an Arab Patriarch to lead the Catholic faithful in the Holy Land met with heavy opposition from the European Catholic orders based in Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land (Corbon, 1998).

References

Archbishop of Constantina, A. (2007). The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.' In N. Ateek, C. Duaybis & M. Tobin (Eds.), *The Forgotten Faithful: A Window into the Life and Witness of Christians in the Holy Land* (pp. 75-79). Sabeel Centre.

Ateek, N. S., Duaybis, C., & Tobin, M. (2007). *The forgotten faithful: A window into the life and witness of Christians in the holy land*. Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center.

Bertram, A., & Young, J. W. A. (1926). *The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem; Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Palestine to inquire and report upon certain controversies between the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Arab Orthodox Community*. H. Milford, Oxford University Press.

Colbi, S. P. (1980). The Christian Establishment in Jerusalem. In J.L. Kramer (Ed.), *Jerusalem: Problems and prospects* (pp. 153–177). Praeger.
Corbon, J. (1998). The Churches of the Middle East: Their Origins and Identity, from their Roots in the Past to their Openness to the Present. In A. Pacini (Ed.), *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future* (PP. 92-110). Clarendon Press.
Cragg, K. (1992). *The Arab Christian: A history in the Middle East*. Mowbray.
Cust, L. G. A. (1929). *The Status Quo in the Holy Places*, with an Annexe on the Status Quo in the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, by A. E. Kardus. His Majesty's Stationary Office.
Dumper, M. (2002). The Christian Churches of Jerusalem in the Post-Oslo Period. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *31*(2), 51–65. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.31.2.51
Dumper, M. (2003). *The Politics of Sacred Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict*. L. Rienner.
El-Assal, R. A. (1999). *Caught in between: The story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli*. SPCK.
Hintlian, G. (2004). Reflections of a Jerusalem Christian. *bitterlemons-international.org*. 2 (43).
Hintlian, G. (2007). Pilgrimage from a local point of view. In N. S. Ateek, C. Duaybis and M. Tobin (Eds.), *The Forgotten Faithful: A Window into the life and witness of Christians in the Holy Land*. (pp. 172-175). Sabeel Centre.
Katz, I., & Kark, R. (2005). The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its congregation: Dissent over real estate. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 37(4), 509–534. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743805052189
Khūrī Shiḥādah, Khūrī Niqūlā, & Sa'd Abū Jābir Ra'ūf. (2002). *A Survey of the History of the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem*. Dar Al-Shorouk.
Klein, M. (2003). *The Jerusalem Problem: The Struggle for Permanent Status*. University Press of Florida.
Kuruvilla, S. J. (2004). Jerusalem's Churches under Israeli Rule, *Al Aqsa Journal* 7 (1): 23-28.
Kuruvilla, S. J. (2004). The Politics of Mainstream Christianity in Jerusalem, [seminar paper presented at Graduate Research in Politics-GRiP Seminar, School of Humanities and Social Sciences- HuSS, Department of Politics, University of Exeter].
Kuruvilla, S. J. (2005). Church-State Relations in Palestine: Issues and Perspectives under Jewish rule, [paper presented at 55th Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association (P.S.A.), University of Leeds].
Mansour, A. B. (2004). *Narrow Gate Churches: The Christian presence in the holy land under Muslim and Jewish rule*. Hope publishing House.
Masters, B. A. (2004). *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The roots of sectarianism*. Cambridge University Press.
Musallam, A. (1996). Christian Arabs and the Making of Arab Nationalism. *Al-Liqa Journal*. 6, 27-47.
O'Mahony, A. (2000). *Palestinian-Arab orthodox christians: Religion, politics and Church-State Relations in Jerusalem, c. 1908-1925*. Chronos Revue d'Histoire de l'Universit`e de Balamand.
O' Mahony, A. (1993). Christianity in the Holy Land: The Historical Background. *The Month* 26 (12), 469-476.
Okkenhaug, I. M. (2002). *The quality of heroic living, of high endeavour and adventure: Anglican mission, women, and education in Palestine, 1888-1948*. Brill.
Ramon, A. (1997). *The Christian Element and the Jerusalem Question*. Background Papers for Policy Makers-4. Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies.
Roussos, S. (2005). Eastern Orthodox perspectives on Church–State Relations and religion and politics in modern Jerusalem. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, *5*(2), 103–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250500219642
Segev, T. (2000). *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British mandate*. Little Brown.
Sizer, S. R. (1999). Christian Zionism: A British Perspective. In N. S. Ateek, & M. Prior (Eds.), *Holy Land-Hollow Jubilee*. Melisende.
Tsimhoni, D. (1976). *The British Mandate and the Arab Christians in Palestine 920-1925* [Unpublished PhD dissertation]. London University.
Tsimhoni, D. (1993). *Christian communities in Jerusalem and the West Bank since 1948: An historical, social, and political study*. Praeger.
Wasserstein, B. (2008). *Divided Jerusalem: The struggle for the Holy City*. Yale University Press.