

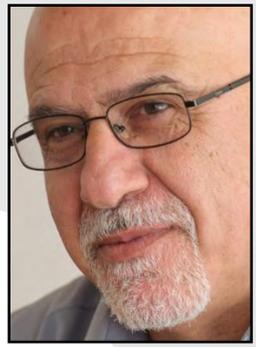


VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

E-Newsletter -February 2017

Palestinian Christians: A presence of hope and action

Each week, Al Quds Newspaper (the largest circulation daily newspaper in the Palestinian territories), publishes a column that is authored by Kairos Palestine. The column, "A Moment of Truth," is named after the Palestinian Kairos Document that was published in 2009. In December 2016, Rifat Kassis (former coordinator for Kairos Palestine, and current member of the coordination group) was published in an article entitled "The Future of Christians in Palestine: Presence rather than Existence." In this month's "Voices from the South," we present an adapted article that was based on Rifat's original Arabic piece. Rifat discusses three theological elements that are crucial to understanding how Christians in the region have managed to preserve their existence and role in their societies.



Christians in Palestine are part and parcel of the Arab Palestinian nation, and Christianity is deeply rooted in this region. For centuries, Palestinian Christians have managed to preserve their existence, and to survive

all turmoil and wars all through their history in this region.

Nevertheless, many would not ignore or feign ignorance of the fact that this presence is more troubled today than at any time in history. There are new and old forces in the region that pose threats to religious and ethnic minorities. There are justified concern over occurring in many Arab countries and the rise of political movements that claim to be Islamic, those which attack and oppress religious minorities in the region. In addition, there are the racist policies of Israel, its systematic expropriation of land, and the absence of any political horizon for a just peace that can bring political

and economic stability to our region.

Yet Palestinian Christians will and shall preserve their presence and existence in this region forever. There are three theological elements that are crucial to understanding Christians in this area have managed to preserve their existence and role in their societies.

1. Theology of Hope

Most Palestinian Christians believe that they descend from the first Christians, belonging to the first church. The circumstances they have undergone for the last 2000 years could be considered a kind of perpetual war: passed from one empire to another, one battle to another, one occupation to another. These continual hardships have generated many challenges, yet they have also yielded a theology that could be described as a "survival theology": drawn from hope, it is a theology that longs for life. Christians understood their presence as an integral part of Christ's mission and its continuation; they kept their hope, steadfastness and faith alive. This, in short, is the conviction shared by the remaining Christians in Palestine.

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Kairos Palestine is a network of Palestinian Christians who authored "Kairos Palestine: a moment of truth" – a Christian Palestinian's word to the world about the occupation of Palestine, an expression "of faith, hope and love from the heart of palestinian suffering", and a call for solidarity in ending over six decades of oppression. The document is available in over 20 languages.

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What matters is that we have a mission assigned for us to protect steadfastly our faith, our presence and the future of our children, regardless of the size of our population.

2. Theology of Coexistence and Acceptance

Christians in Palestine have lived as a religious minority for the past 1000 years, and have always faced ever-changing challenges. Like how to maintain a dignified presence and keep their identity without losing or eroding it? How to reach out to others on the one hand, while protecting their rights as Christians and as Palestinians on the other?

Over time, these underlying questions have integrated another element into their theology: a coexistence theology, a theology based on love, freedom, understanding, reconciliation among themselves and with others, accepting and respecting pluralism.

Coexistence and pluralism become more difficult when you live, as today, in a context of military occupation and oppression, where your very existence is at stake. But coexistence continues to be a command and reconciliation a duty while working for justice.

3. Theology of Love and Resistance

As mentioned, the presence of Christians in Palestine is at stake due to the Israeli military occupation of their land. It is at stake in the entire region, too, due to various emerging powers that are less tolerant of other religions and ideologies.

Christians must hold their ground in the face of such difficulties, not withdrawing or losing their vision. This is a key part of what Kairos Palestine tried to say in its document "A Moment of Truth": that we must adopt a loving stance in response to others' presence, but a stance that – even through love – is baptised with resistance and struggle.

We must remember that our faith equips us

to overcome the injustices we suffer and the conflicts we undergo. Resistance does not prevent love, nor does love prevent resistance. Both need to go hand in hand. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Solidarity and the Struggle for Justice

Through these three theological elements, we can better understand the dynamic role of Christians in Palestine and their important contributions to society throughout history. Faith, hope, and love are the magic words that have perpetuated their existence and strengthened their presence. Needless to say, the Palestinian Christian reality is not an easy one. It is a presence based on hope, but hope in action; a presence that consists not of merely waiting, but of dynamism and struggle. Our choice is to refuse the easy road of withdrawal and isolation; our commitment is to live openly, love truthfully, resist with dignity, and keep our presence vibrant and engaged.

At the same time, we ask our friends and all justice loving people to turn their eyes to Palestine, think of your Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters who suffer under a foreign military occupation, and remember that their lives and their presence – physical, cultural, spiritual – is at stake.

We ask, too, that you walk alongside us in our peaceful struggle against oppression, joining your voices and speaking up before your governments in support of our rights and equality. With such help and solidarity, we can finally live in peace with justice: the peace that all people aspire to and deserve, the peace that was announced in Bethlehem, the peace that will prevail again. ■

Rifat Kassis is the previous coordinator of Kairos Palestine, and now sits in the coordinating group. He works with GRIP. Consulting in Beit Sahour. He can be reached at rifatkassis15@gmail.com.

Photos:
Peaceful march by the Bethlehem wall for World Week of Peace in Palestine & Israel EAPP | Photography
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