

# Christian Ecumenism in Israel/Palestine

*Walter Harrelson*

April 2006

My first experience of Middle Eastern Christianity first-hand came in 1951 when a colleague and I, wandering about in Damascus, came upon a Syrian Orthodox church at prayer. We went in and sat on the back pew, primarily to rest and cool off. I had had courses at Union Seminary in New York with Georges Florowsky, one of the great theologians of the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, and I had read Ernst Best's *Spirit and Life of Eastern Orthodoxy*, with its wonderful picture of the icon as the heart of Orthodox religion.

But nothing had prepared me for the experience of the celebration of the Christian liturgy in this little, backwater Syrian Orthodox church during Holy Week in a Damascus suburb. It was clear that this act of worship was, for the small congregation gathered there (mostly women covered in black), an opening of the floodgates of heaven to allow divine blessings to pour down upon both the assembled group of worshipers and Damascus, and Syria, and the Middle East, and earth itself. God was making all things new, beginning with those who drew in the incense as the censer swing back and forth, as the service was intoned, and as the priest moved back and forth from behind the iconostasis to the door that opened to reveal the mysteries being played out in the darkness.

From that day to this I became a Baptist with the spirit of an Orthodox Christian. That experience enabled me at least partially to understand the later testimony of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who said that so long as the Marxist regime of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam let the Church celebrate the liturgy, the whole country was safe—for God flooded the land with life and blessing as the heavenly feast on earth was observed.

You can understand, therefore, my readiness to accept the assignment to spend a year or two as Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in 1977, where I would be living in Israel and working with a variety of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and free-church Christians in behalf of ecumeni-

cal Christianity. My wife and I moved to Tantur in August 1978, had a year there, and returned for a half year in January of 1980—surely, some of the most enriching and important months of our now long lives. Without that experience I would not dare to have chosen my topic for this article. And even with that experience, I know all too well that I cannot do the topic justice.

I want first to outline the varieties of Christian life in Israel/Palestine today. Then I want to say a word or two describing, in general, the character of this varied representation of the Christian community – its special strengths, its features that make Christian ecumenism a challenge, and its political setting. Then I want to spend the rest of my time on the matter of the importance of this varied Christian community for the world Church.

### The Numbers of Middle Eastern Christians

In 1995, the last year for which I have figures, there were over six million Christians in the Middle East, of whom just over one-half were Coptic Christians, most of them in Egypt and Sudan, but with thousands scattered throughout the area. Coptic Christians have a large place in the economic and political life of the region.

The next largest group are the Greek Orthodox, totaling almost a million, with the largest numbers in Syria and Lebanon. Next come the Maronites (Syrian Christians in full communion with Rome) with about a half million. Melkite Christians (those who accepted Chalcedon in 451 and who today have standing with Rome) with not quite a half million, Chaldean with 400,000 (mostly in Iraq), Armenian Apostolic with 350,000, Roman Catholic 86,000, Protestant 80,000, Syrian Catholic 99,000, Assyrian (Nestorian Christians) 110,000, and about 50,000 Armenian Catholics. In addition, there are Russian, Romanian, and Ethiopian Christians numbering perhaps fewer than a thousand, plus many evangelical Christian bodies with members throughout the region.

**In Israel and the occupied territories, here are the basic numbers:**

Demographics		
	Israel	Palestine
Copts:	800	2,800
Greek Orthodox	33,000	41,600
Maronite	7,300	300
Melkite	44,000	4,400
Armenian	1,300	2,900
Roman Catholic	13,000	15,000

With the other smaller groups of Christians, the numbers total just over 104,000 Christians in Israel and 76,300 in Palestine. To these we should add the Jordanian population of 150,000 Christians, the majority of whom are Greek Orthodox and Chaldean.

Is the population decreasing dramatically? Yes, clearly many Christians have immigrated to other lands since the outbreak of the First World War. At that time, 1914, Christians comprised 26 percent of the population of the Near East. In 1995 the percentage had dropped to 9.2 percent. But the total population of Christians, remember, is still well over six and a half million. That is a very significant presence in the lands that comprise the Middle East.

On the other hand, in Israel, the Christian percentage is 2.1 percent, and in Palestine 3.8 percent. When one leaves out the Coptic Church, which one should never do, the numbers and percentages are small indeed. But one author writing in 2003 (Kirsten Pedersen, *The Holy Land Christians*) has figures to show that there has been a slight increase in the numbers of Christians in Israel/Palestine since 1948. In any case, the numbers as usual do not tell the whole story.

### Varieties of Christian Life and Worship in Israel/Palestine

The Book of Acts tells us of a church in Jerusalem in which Jewish and Greek Christians worshiped together, even experiencing a sharing of their resources for the common good. The Greek Orthodox Church in Israel/Palestine sees itself as the continuation of that Christian community, the first Christian Church, the heir of the first gift of the Spirit, with the first bishop, the brother of Jesus, James. This is THE mother church. A priest of that community said to me once, when I invited him to come and work with us at Tantur on ecumenical subjects, "I will of course be glad to come and present you with the truth of the Christian Church. I have nothing to learn from the experience, but I am of course willing to share the truth with you and your colleagues." Most of the Church's leaders of course are much more deeply involved in the ecumenical work of the Church. The patriarch of Antioch heads this church today. A small group of Christians in Israel and Palestine relate to the patriarch of Jerusalem, once a major force in the land.

The large body of Christians affiliated with Rome includes the Maronites, located primarily in Israel proper, who for centuries have been in full communion with Rome, and the Malkites who also have standing with Rome. The Melkite community seeks to hold fast to its Orthodox connection even as it relates to Rome. And there is a sizeable Latin Catholic community with its own Patriarch.

The third body of churches are those that rejected the Council of Chalcedon, or at least interpreted its theological claims in their own way. These ancient churches, the Coptic, the Syrian, the Armenian, and the Ethiopian, have small numbers in Israel and Palestine but are influential far beyond their numbers.

Their Scriptures include several texts treated as apocryphal or excluded from the Bible entirely by other churches. While their numbers in Israel and Palestine are small, their numbers in other lands are large indeed. The Armenian church in 301 became the first Christian state, followed some twenty-five years by the Ethiopian Christian kingdom. Syrian Christianity once extended far to the east, including large numbers of Christians as far as western China. And the Coptic church, as noted earlier, has over three million Christians today. Ethiopian Christians number forty to fifty million.

When we speak of Christianity in the Holy Land we are speaking primarily of these three Christian bodies. Most of these Christians are of course Arabic-speaking, and their political sympathies lie largely with their Muslim neighbors.

To these groups we need to add Anglican and Protestant/free church groups, all of which of course came later to the land but remain a significant part of the Christian witness in the land. Anglican institutions and congregations were planted in the mid-nineteenth century, and Lutheran institutions and congregations came soon thereafter. Reformed church bodies helped plant the American universities in Cairo and Beirut, plus churches, academies, and hospitals in Palestine proper.

The flow of monastic communities from the west into the land is as old as Christianity, or nearly so. Christians from Asia Minor and Europe from earliest days made their way to the Holy Land, there to seek to live a life of holiness and pray for the world's health and peace. Long before the Crusades, Orthodox Christians settled the entire land with their monastic communities. The remains of these monasteries keep coming to light in the sands of the Negev in the south.

The Crusades brought fanaticism and exploitation from the West, but they also brought monastic orders that have remained to this day. Franciscans still are a force in Israel, especially in Nazareth and Jerusalem. Dominicans have one of the most important biblical seminars in the land. Jesuits are less numerous but very influential, and the Carmelites actually came into existence in the Holy Land. European and North American Benedictines contribute greatly to the life of faith in Israel/Palestine. And these educational institutions play a large part in the educational and cultural life of the Jewish state, even as they give a distinct flavor to Christian ecumenism in the land.

Anglican Christianity in the land is now indigenous, having its own Arab archbishop and institutions controlled by local Christians. Lutherans have major leadership among the local population as well.

### The Character of This Varied Christian Community

It is no surprise, of course, that many of these Christian bodies give ecumenism in the normal sense of the term a very low priority. We should remember that preserving the ancient languages and traditions is by no means simple among these communities, and yet, that is one of their chief commitments.

What could be more important to a Greek Orthodox community than preserving the glorious intellectual and spiritual heritage of 2000 years of Christianity in the Holy Land? And for the other churches, the numbers today may be small, but what massive numbers are remembered from their history!

The entire kingdom of Armenia was converted to Christianity in 301, and Ethiopia was converted to Christianity twenty-five years later. Indeed Coptic Christianity traces its origins to the first century, and Antioch in Syria was the place where, also in the first century, the name "Christian" was first applied to those who followed our Lord. Small wonder, then, that these ancient churches want first and foremost to offer their treasures to the larger world, not set out to learn about the ecumenical witness from others.

We hear much about the rivalries among these Christians, especially about how they contend with one another for the space they claim in the holy places. Those of you who have been to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre will have heard the stories of how the roof of the building went in need of repairs for decades because the several churches could not agree on who had responsibility for what. And just last Sunday, as the Orthodox Easter was celebrated, early in the morning, the Christian groups contended for the right to secure the first miraculous fire from the site of Jesus' death.

One may well ask whether anything like Christian ecumenism as it is pursued in the West makes any sense in Israel/Palestine. I contend that it makes great sense, but that the likely contribution to ecumenism by the majority Christian groups in Israel/Palestine differ from those that the Western churches can be expected to produce.

For example, each of these groups holds to a distinctive form of Christian witness that has a very long history. Many of them have their own language for the liturgy, although all of their Scriptures and traditions will also be available in their own native tongue. All of them know that they must work hard to keep these traditions alive, including knowledge of the ancient languages, and much in their immediate environment works against their efforts.

The Armenian Orthodox Church provides an impressive elementary and secondary school system in Jerusalem where studies of Armenian language, history, literature, and religious traditions are part of the curriculum. Armenian Christianity in eastern Turkey is near the region where Turks and Kurds continue to be engaged in violent conflict, which imperils the Armenian community as well.

It is good to see that the Latin Patriarchate is now held by a local Arabic-speaking Christian, and the same is true of the Anglican Archbishopric, with its second native Arab in the chair. The influence of Greece on the Orthodox community is of course very considerable, since the continuing use of the Greek language by the Church of Jerusalem from its founding to this day is highly prized, understandably so. But all of the churches have their Scriptures and liturgies available in their native tongues.

## Arab Christianity in History

Some years ago, Bishop Kenneth Cragg of Great Britain wrote a remarkable history of Arab Christianity from its beginnings to this day. He titles the book, *The Arab Christian* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). It is a brilliant and challenging work. He has a luminous chapter on Arab Christianity and Israel, which is followed by the heart of the book, a chapter titled "The Arab Christian Soul in Poetry, Art, and Liturgy."

Bishop Cragg tells the story from the beginnings of Arab Christianity, long before the rise of Islam, through the whole of Muslim and Christian history until today, showing that Arab Christianity is a distinct representation of Christian faith worthy of study and meditation in its own right.

My occasional experiences of Arab Christianity lead me to echo his finding. I have studied a synaxary (a catalogue of stories about the saints of the church to be read or recited on their day) in Arabic, showing how widespread is Arabic Christian literature, and how little known it is in western circles.

## The Ecumenical Witness of Christianity in Israel/Palestine

Now I want to come to the point: what is the mission of Israeli and Palestinian Christianity for the universal Church? What do they offer the world church that we all would be the poorer not to have?

### Variety

The first gift is precisely the variety of Christian witness, preserved through the entire history of Christianity in some instances, and in every case very ancient. Christian witness in this variety of thought, liturgy, hymnody, and personal piety is a very valuable gift to the world church. Even when the witness is not without problems, it is valuable.

The recently discovered GOSPEL OF JUDAS is a case in point. The Coptic Church in Egypt and Sudan had many Christians who found a Gnostic way of reading the Gospel very appealing. Who can deny that the material world is a drag on the human spirit, that the lusts of the flesh gnaw at us and make the spirit long to be free? Who does not find it appealing to think of the spark of divinity within the human soul as seeking to re-unite with its origin in God? But for most of us, the Hebrew-Christian insistence that God created a universe that was pronounced not only good but "very good" is true and right. Escape from the creation is escape from our fellow human beings, from earth's creatures, from earth itself. Classic Christian faith calls us not to escape but to join God in reclaiming for God's own good purposes all that has marred and polluted God's good creation.

Similarly, the classic Orthodox Christian picture of the liturgy as, in its observance, opening the gates of heaven and letting God's transforming grace

and love spread out over every land, every society, every community, cleansing and healing and restoring to its intended character—is that not a glorious reading of Christian faith? And what about the icon itself—a picture of heaven here on earth, opening a door to God’s presence, enabling the faithful to share the joys of heaven in advance of Resurrection Day?

Eastern Catholic and Orthodox thought is also a marvel and a joy to revel in. Here, the intellectual-spiritual work of thousands of fellow Christians has been worked over and worked through, generation after generation. The history of Christian thought is a large part of the history of human thought. What a gift that this history of thought has living women and men who work on it from morning to night, who live in its strength and power, and who add to it their own findings!

### **Location in Israel or Beside Israel**

Another special gift of Christianity in Israel/Palestine is its very setting. In many parts of the world, Jewish-Christian dialogue is an option; in Israel/Palestine it is an inescapable daily practice. One has to confront Jews—secular and religious Jews, liberal and conservative Jews, reasonable and fanatical Jews, Jews who ideologically claim all the land as theirs by divine Gift and Jews who know that there is no proper life for the state of Israel unless there is a comparable life for their non-Jewish neighbors. And I am convinced that Christians come to terms with their faith in no way better than in conversation with Jews. Ask what is the heart of Christian faith and the answer will surely have much to do with Jewish faith and witness.

It is true that many Arab Christians fault Western Christians for their long mistreatment of Jews that contributed markedly to the rise of the unrelated pagan criminality of National Socialism. They look on Western support of the state of Israel as born of Christian guilt over the Shoah, the Holocaust, something that Arab Christians had little to do with—yet suffer from unfairly. Whatever may be the truth of that claim, I know that Arab Christians through the centuries have done their share of mistreating Jews and misunderstanding Judaism. Most Christians rightly acknowledge today that Muslims treated Jews better than Christians did—over the long centuries.

Thank God for the efforts well under way in Israel/Palestine to engage Jews in conversation about the import of Judaism for Christian faith and the possibility that Jews have more to learn from Christianity than they have tended to believe. There is a new Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations headed by Daniel Rossing. Look up his recent efforts to get fellow Jews to recognize the importance of their joining in that effort.

## The Importance of Sacred Space

"God is Spirit, and those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth." This word of Jesus to the Samaritan woman (John 4) is basic to Christian belief. Monotheistic faith rules out the idolatry of sacred space and even sacred time. God is the creator of time and space, and God is equally present to and distant from all times and places.

Even so, we time-and-space creatures come to know and experience the fundamental meanings of our lives in connection with temporal and spatial realities. Everyone who has been to the Holy Land knows what a claim some places now have on them.

I will never forget one Saturday pre-Easter midnight with a Benedictine priest of some seventy years piling the wood on the outside Holy Fire, awaiting the Resurrection and anticipating Pentecost. Easter celebrations since then always partake of that one, and that one was in the Holy Land. The passing of the holy fire of Easter Morn is another example. Or a foot-washing in the Upper Room: who can deny that its location has much to do with its power?

Similarly, hearing the Sermon on the Mount on the hills of Galilee overlooking Capernaum, or eating fish beside the sea in Tiberias, or looking out to north and south and east and west from Mt. Tabor—these all not only make the biblical scenes and stories come alive; they make us come alive to the truth and power and beauty and mystery of the Gospels.

Christians from the earliest centuries understood this. The Great Christian scholar Origen moved to Caesarea to do his biblical researches and his theological reflections. St. Jerome moved to Bethlehem in order to translate the Bible into Latin, with the help of local scholars, Jews included. Thousands of monks moved to the land, subjecting families to incredible privations and themselves suffering materially beyond our imagining in order to be close to the scene in which the story of Jesus and Jesus' predecessors in the faith lived out their lives and faced their suffering and death.

God can reach anyone anywhere; there is no uniquely revelatory spot on earth, but Christians, like Jews and Muslims, are drawn to the stories, the scenes, the emblems of their faith and there find a closeness to holiness and transcendent meaning available in principle anywhere but (it seems) specially present just there.

## God's Promises

And there is what is called an eschatological power present in the land, shared and upheld by Christians in Israel/Palestine. I put it this way. Israel's prophets and poets and sages knew that one spot on earth had special significance, for it was there that God's purposes for the very universe itself awaited consummation. That spot was the Holy Land, and in particular Zion, the "mother of us all," as it is called in 2 Esdras. God's plan and purpose for the universe is put in con-



This is where the ecumenical witness of Christians in Israel/Palestine has its greatest significance. Those varied Christians with their precious ancient rites and traditions, their fierce determination to keep their witness alive, are right there on the scene. Of course they do not adequately embody the promises of God for Zion; neither do Christians elsewhere. But they love Zion, they know that Jerusalem is the “navel of the earth” (Ezekiel 38:12), and that their faithful witness in the land of the Promise counts for much precisely because it is in the very place where Jesus taught and healed and suffered and died and was raised. It is Holy Land, for all the inhabitants of earth. And of course, for those who hold these visions close to their hearts, the Holy Land is a paradigm for every land, a model to guide life in any place and in every place.

### Commendations

Two institutions should be mentioned that do much to further the mission of ecumenical Christianity. The first is the Middle East Council of Churches, which seeks to represent the life and work of all of the Christian communities in the Holy Land, and the second is the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity, which seeks to call attention worldwide to the ongoing theological work and witness of the Christian communities in Israel/Palestine. There are many other ecumenical bodies doing outstanding work (see the notes below), but these deserve special mention.

Some of the Christians in Israel/Palestine who, during my lifetime, have taught me the importance of the Christian ecumenical witness in the land are from Western lands. They have made Israel/Palestine their home. I shall never forget two Dominicans of the Ecole biblique, Pierre Benoit and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, who have given their lives to helping the world see how the Bible takes on fresh glory and power when taught on the scene.

The White Father Frans Bouwen, decades ago moved to Jerusalem to give his life working with the various Christian groups in the Middle East. His publication, *Proche-Orient Chretien*, regularly reports on the entire Christian scene in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine. What a service!

And one of the most devout and dedicated persons I have ever known among the Christians of the Holy Land – Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen, a Danish Christian who moved to Israel decades ago and has devoted her life largely to the Ethiopian Christian community. Sister Abraham, as she is called today, has written a fine history of the Christian presence in the Holy Land. She is the very embodiment of ecumenical Christianity in Israel/Palestine. She is fluent in Arabic and modern Hebrew and in many European languages as well.

Two others on my list, which of course could go on and on. Abuna Elias Chacour, now a Melkite Archbishop, has had a school in upper Galilee for decades, educating Christians and Muslims and Jews, constantly expanding his mission, speaking out critically against injustices on the Israeli or the Palestinian side, and living in confident hope for Zion's future. I mention also one Jewish

scholar and activist, Daniel Rossing, now the head of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, who for forty years has been a student of Christianity in the Middle East and has worked tirelessly to interpret Christianity for the Jewish and Israeli worlds.

Perhaps one last person needs to be mentioned: President emeritus Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., of the University of Notre Dame, now retired and nearly blind, has been one of the best friends that both Israeli leaders and the Christian community in Israel/Palestine have ever had. Almost single-handedly he brought the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research at Tantur, Israel, into existence and has kept it going for over 30 years. Under its current Rector, Michael McGarry, the Tantur Institute is devoted to helping in all possible ways to see that the Ecumenical witness of Christianity in the Holy Land is better known and its gifts more widely enjoyed and appreciated. To all these, I give my deepest thanks.

## **Suggestions for Further Reading**

Bailey, Betty Jane and J. Martin Bailey, WHO ARE THE CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST? Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Betts, Robert Brenton, CHRISTIANS IN THE ARAB EAST. Atlanta: John Knox, 1978.

Cragg, Kenneth, THE ARAB CHRISTIAN: A HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE EAST. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991.

Cunningham, Lawrence S., ed., ECUMENISM: PRESENT REALITIES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1998.

Pacini, Andrea, ed., CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST: THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Pedersen, Kirsten Stoffregen, THE HOLY LAND CHRISTIANS. Jerusalem, 2003.

## **About the Writer:**

Walter Harrelson is Distinguished Professor emeritus of Hebrew Bible at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University and Adjunct University Professor of the Divinity School of Wake Forest University.

His divinity school and graduate education was completed at Union Theological Seminary, New York and Columbia University (M.Div. 1949, Th.D. 1953), with additional study at the University of Basel (1950-51) and Harvard University (1951-53). He holds honorary degrees from the University of the South (D.D., 1974), Mars Hill College (Litt.D., 1979), Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis (D.D., 1992), and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (Litt.D., 1994).

Professor Harrelson's academic appointments include four years at Andover Newton Theological School in the Boston area (1951-55), five years at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he served as Dean and Associate Professor (1955-60), thirty years at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University

(1960-90), where he served as Dean from 1967 to 1975. After retirement at Vanderbilt in 1990 he continued there for four additional years completing work on a project supported by the Lilly Endowment. His most recent academic appointment was at Wake Forest University (1994-96), assisting in the completion of plans for a new divinity school and later offering occasional courses there. He continues to hold the title Adjunct University Professor at Wake Forest.

Academic leaves and projects abroad include two years in Rome (1962-63 and 1983-84), direction of a microfilming project in Ethiopia (1970-82), the rectorship of the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research in Jerusalem (1978-79 and January-June 1980). His research has been supported by the Institute of International Education, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Fulbright Program, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Ford Foundation.

His writings include *Jeremiah, Prophet to the Nations* (1959), *Interpreting the Old Testament* (1964), *From Fertility Cult to Worship* (1969, 1980), *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (1980, revised ed. 1997), *Jews and Christians, A Troubled Family* (with Rabbi Randall M. Falk, 1990), *The Making of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (with Bruce M. Metzger and Robert C. Dentan, 1991), *Jews and Christians in Pursuit of Social Justice* (also with Rabbi Falk, 1996), and *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (2003). He is an Associate Editor of the *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (1990) and the *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (1995). Other writings include book chapters and many encyclopedia and journal articles. He is a regular reviewer for several periodicals, including the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, *Interpretation*, and *Early Christian Studies*.

Professor Harrelson is a member or past member of numerous scholarly and professional societies, including Phi Beta Kappa (1946), the Society of Biblical Literature (President, 1972), the Catholic Biblical Association of America, The Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation (Board of Directors), the American Academy of Religion, the American Society for the Study of Religion, the Christian Scholars Group on Jewish-Christian Relations, and the Church Relations Committee of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is a long-time member of the translation committee that produced the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (1989) and serves now as its chair.

He has taught for brief periods of time at a number of universities, including the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Boston University, Boston College, Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University, the University of the South, and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He has lectured frequently on the relations of Judaism and Christianity, biblical translation, and the import of biblical themes and teachings for responsible personal and public life today.