



Christian Presence in the Middle East - Theological and Political challenges

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At the invitation of the World Council of Churches and the Volos Theological Academy thirty theologians, social scientists, politicians and church representatives gathered in Volos, Greece, from **the 19th to the 23rd of June 2011** in order to discuss *the theological and political challenges facing the Christians in Palestine and the Middle East today*. This invitation came as an immediate follow up on the statement on “The presence and the witness of Christians in the Middle East” issued by the WCC Central Committee in February 2011. Hosted by his Eminence Metropolitan **Ignatius of Demetrias**, this meeting was blessed by the presence of his Excellence Bishop **Athenagoras of Sinope**, representative of his all Holiness Bartholomew’s I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, as well as by a message addressed to the participants by his Beatitude **Ieronymos II**, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece.

The conference was broadcast via radio and globally through the interactive online television station intv.gr with simultaneous translation in Greek and English.

The participants examined first the relevance and the different aspects of the “Kairos document” issued in December 2009 by Palestinian Christians from all church traditions.

In a second stage the participants analyzed the socio-political challenges facing the Christians in the Middle East against the background of the recent uprisings in the Arab World.

Finally the participants listened to witnesses from Christian living experiences coming from different parts of the region.

In these conversations, the conference participants engaged many themes, including:

- The Middle Eastern roots of the Bible
- Occupation and Promised Land
- The recognition that while Christians do not form numerical majorities that there are often negative results from adopting what may be termed a minority mentality
- The implications of historically-formed western theological perspectives, including Christian Zionism, for Christians in the Middle East
- The prospects of the Arab Spring for Christians living throughout the Middle East

- Important discussions of the best ways Christian communities, including leaders, can contribute to shaping the political future of their various contexts
- The breadth of Christian experience in the Mediterranean, including special attention to the Greek Orthodox experiences in Turkey and the Christian condition in Turkish occupied Cyprus, as well as Christians living in Arabic-speaking territories

Concretely:

Bishop Athenagoras of Sinope, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, opened the conference by reading greetings from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, followed by words of welcome from Metropolitan Ignatios of Demetrias, the Mayor of the city of Volos, Panos Skotiniotis, and the Director of the Academy for Theological Studies, Pantelis Kalaitzidis. Greetings completed by Mr. Michel Nseir, Program Executive by the World Council of Churches, who in his speech referred to the importance of discussing and timeliness of the subject of this conference.

The presenters of the first day in the first morning session were **Fr. Jamal Khader**, Dean of the School of Arts at the University of Bethlehem and co-author of the Kairos Document, and the **Rev. Robert Smith** of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the USA (ELCA). Fr. Jamal Khader spoke on “The ‘Kairos Palestine’ Document in its Context.” The Kairos Document was written by all the Christians of Palestine and seeks to address the key questions confronting the Christian population of the region: How can the faith contribute to an approach to and understanding of the occupation and injustice we are experiencing? What can “the Kingdom of God” mean for the Christians of Palestine today, or the command to love one’s enemies? Next, the Rev. Robert Smith spoke on "Anglo-American Christian Zionism: Implications for Palestinian Christians." In response to the Kairos Document, which calls for the Christians of the West to reconsider their basic theological positions that support the unjust policies with regard to the people of Palestine, the speaker attempted to investigate why the Christians of the West often support such views. To this end it was argued that such considerations vis-à-vis the Christians of Palestine were formed over a long historical conflict between the West and Islam, which led to a correspondingly negative perception of the Christians of the East. This division could be overcome if the Palestinians could effectively communicate in the Western context.

The speakers of the second morning session were **Dr. Aikaterini Tsalampouni**, Lecturer in the Department of Pastoral and Social Theology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and **Dr. Radu Preda**, Associate Professor at the Theological Faculty of Babes-Bolyai University in Romania and Director of the Institute INTER. Dr. Tsalampouni spoke about “The ‘Election’ and the People of God: an Orthodox Theological Perspective.” In her talk, the speaker considered the theological issues of “election” and the “people of God” in the Old and New Testaments. The second part

of this paper was a hermeneutical approach to the unit in Romans 9-11. She suggested a different understanding of the concept of election. Rather than understanding election in terms of exclusivity, it can function inclusively and lead to a harmonious coexistence of different religious groups. Radu Preda, in his presentation entitled "Occupation as a Sin: Dehumanizing the Occupant and the Occupied," discussed the repression under communism in Romania. The Kairos Document is a text that highlights the dramatic situation of Christians in the Middle East. A Palestinian Christians carries a double cross, religious and ethnic. The Kairos Document's most important contribution is the introduction of the term "sin" into the political and religious vocabulary.

The speakers for the third session were **Nicolas Abu-Mrad**, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at the "St. John of Damascus" Institute of Orthodox Theology of the University of Balamand, and **Fr. Philip LeMasters**, priest of the Orthodox Antiochian Archdiocese of North America and Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences at McMurry University in the U.S. Dr. Nicolas Abu-Mrad spoke on "The 'Promised Land' in Orthodox Theology," in which he criticized the use of biblical history to validate its modern application on the broader socio-political field, whether Christian or Jewish. As an alternative to this view that biblical history is a kind of continuity through the history of the Christians or the Jews, the speaker's view is based on the fact that the canonicity of the Bible is shaped by the stories themselves, closed parables, which serve to give directions to readers regarding the will of God and the need to follow his word. Consequently, the concepts of "Israel" and the "Promised Land" acquire a meaning that emerges from the texts themselves, and have no need for continuation in history. Jews and Christians are called in this case to fulfill in their life the Bible's call for the realization of a community that follows his words and commandments. Fr. Philip LeMasters spoke on "Orthodox Approaches to Non-violent Resistance." After first reviewing the roots of this conception in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the speaker turned to the martyrs and confessors who, with their non-violent resistance, confronted and refused to obey the secular powers' demands that they abandon their faith. In cases in which the very existence of the Church was at risk, the steadfast witness of the faith constitutes a form of non-violent resistance. In Palestine and other regions, Orthodox Christian should refuse to obey unjust laws and to work for the formation of peaceful societies, in which every human being is understood as the image of God.

In the first day's fourth and final session, the speakers were **Fr. Mitri Raheb**, Director of the Diyar Consortium in Bethlehem and **Dr. Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi**, Lecturer at the Hellenic Open University and Research Fellow of the Academy for Theological Studies. Fr. Mitri Raheb developed the theme "Ur-text and Context: A Palestinian Christian Reading of the Bible." The original text of the Bible is deeply connected with the pre-political context of Palestine. The speaker's position is that the Christians of Palestine are the continuation of the people of the Bible. This

means that if we want to understand what the Bible really says, we should listen to the experiences of the Christians of Palestine. Dr. Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, in her talk on "Neighbour and Love of Enemies: a difficult command and a challenge in periods of occupation and war" analyzed the meaning of neighbor in Christian theology. Evaluating the New Testament references to the significance of one's neighbor and love for one's enemy, she emphasized that, for Christian theology and particularly for Orthodox theology, love is a commandment, a duty, a "witness" and a "martyrdom." As a practical example of transcending the boundaries of race, gender, and ethnicity, and of love for the other, some bishops in the period of German occupation rescued many Jews at the risk of losing their own lives. The Metropolitan of Demetrias was, at that time, Joachim, through whom many Jews were saved.

The speakers of the second day in the first morning session were **Dr. Tarek Mitri**, former Minister of Information for the government of Lebanon, and **Dr. Assaad Elias Kattan**, Professor of Orthodox Theology at the University of Münster (Germany) and Director of the Center for Religious Studies at the same university. Dr. Tarek Mitri explored the topic "Christians in the Arab World: Between protected minority status and full citizenship." The presenter spoke about the hopes born among the Arab Christians as a result of the "Arab Spring." He discussed the dynamics in the region and particularly within the Christian community and emphasized the importance and necessity of overcoming the focus on minority identities, highlighting the importance of formulating an identity of common citizenship. Dr. Assaad Elias Kattan spoke on "The Presence of Christians in the Arab World: A 'Role Syndrome'?" Christian discourse in the Middle East seems to play according to the rules of the ideology of 'role.' One could describe this ideology as follows: in order to survive in the Middle East, the Christians should prove themselves useful and play a beneficial role in their environment. To the degree that they are useful, their presence is considered important; otherwise, their presence is threatened and accorded no significance. This ideology recalls the Middle Ages, to the extent that the Christians are dealt with as a collective entity, whose existence depends on their productivity and profitability. Both Christians and Muslims are called today to rediscover the value of authentic citizenship in order to shape modern, free Arab societies.

At the end of this session, Metropolitan Ignatios of Demetrias read **a message from the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos II**, which emphasized the importance and significance of the conference in relation to the presence and the problems of Christians of all traditions in the Middle East.

It is also worth noting that, following this, the Minister of Information of Lebanon Tarek Mitri suggested formulating a text-statement at the end of the conference, which would detail the conference's key findings and recommendations and which would be duly sent to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in view of the upcoming gathering of the Primates of the Patriarchates and the Church of Cyprus, which will take place in September at the Phanar.

The second morning session featured **Afif Safieh**, former Ambassador of the Palestinian Authority in Washington, Moscow and the Vatican. The Honorable Ambassador Afif Safieh discussed the theme: "The Recent International Awakening and Interest in the Situation of Christians in the Arab World: Between Solidarity and Exploitation." Safieh offered a panoramic view of the role of Christians in Palestine and its public life, from politics and diplomacy, education and medicine to the arts, culture, theater and music, concluding: "Palestine will be resurrected and you know, we in Jerusalem, we have previous experience with resurrection!"

The afternoon session included presentations from **Dr. Mary Mikhael**, president of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, and **Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou**, Assistant Professor at Boston University and member of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. Dr. Mary Mikhael spoke about "The Place of Women in Arab Societies." The Middle East is the cradle of the three monotheistic religions. It is well known that Middle Eastern societies were organized as patriarchal societies. Between religion and patriarchy, women were often denied equal opportunities in education and their participation in decisions that lead to progress. Women believe that the churches are responsible for addressing and correcting any injustice that prevents them from actively participating in decision-making. Women are able to enrich the life and witness of the Church and therefore should not be hindered from taking leading roles. Women are in a position to serve the Church and society, in the hopes of making the world a better place for all. Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou developed the theme: "The Politics of Religious Cleansing: The Erasure of Christianity in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus." The paper examined the conditions of the Christian presence in Turkish-occupied Cyprus. The speaker's basic thesis was that after the partition of Cyprus in 1974, the Turkish Cypriot authorities and Turkish occupation forces implemented and continue a systematic policy of religious cleansing, the goal of which is to eliminate every trace of Christianity (whether it be a site or people) from Turkish-occupied Cyprus.

The first speaker in the first morning session of the last day was the Metropolitan of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Aleppo, **Mar Youhanna Ibrahim**. Metropolitan Mar Youhanna Ibrahim discussed "Christians in Syria." After describing the situation in the region at large and its direct or indirect effects on Christians in Syria, His Eminence outlined the current presence of Christians in the region, trying to offer some suggestions to the questions relating to what the media in surrounding countries expect vis-à-vis developments in Syria, where this will lead, and when the demonstrations and protests in the region will stop.

The second morning session featured **Dr. Sotirios Varnalidis**, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral and Social Theology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Deacon **Sevan Nazareat Sankrim**, representative of the Armenian Orthodox Archdiocese of Baghdad. Dr. Sotirios Varnalidis discussed "Christians in Constantinople." Starting from his personal testimony, he described in historical perspective the different phases of persecution against the Orthodox Romans (i.e. Greeks) of the City (1943-45, 1955, 1964, 1971). He then sketched the current

situation (the Romans' living conditions, education/schools, the charitable activities of the Roman communities of Constantinople, etc.) which, although it is still difficult with several unresolved problems (e.g., the non-recognition by applicable law of the legal status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate), nevertheless nowadays shows some signs of amelioration from the official Turkish side (e.g., tentative steps to improve religious freedom in Turkey). He concluded with optimism about the prospects for the future. Deacon Sevan Nazarat Sankrim spoke on "Christians in Iraq." The main problem for Christians in Iraq is their flight from the country and the lack of people with an open mind. The conditions in which Christians live in the region render them unprotected and exposed to impediments to their very survival, inasmuch as the tribal system in Iraq, of which they are not a part, defends its own members against all others. The most important thing the Iraqi people as a whole need is the message of love, as offered and interpreted by the Christians in Iraq in the difficult conditions in which they themselves live.

The third morning session was attended by the **Rev. Mohsen Muneer Rizkalla** of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services in Cairo and **Mr. Nazo Berberian**, a journalist and representative of the Armenian Orthodox Church-Holy See of Cilicia. The Rev. Mohsen Muneer Rizkalla discussed "Christians in Egypt." The presence of Christianity in Egypt dates back as early as the first century. Christians formed the majority in the region for centuries even in the seventh century after the Arab conquest. Christians in the region enjoyed a real commonwealth during the period 1919-1952. During the 70s Christians endured difficult conditions due to persecution and a policy of annihilation. After the revolution that took place in January 2011, many changes were made and are being made for a better future for the Christians in Egypt and true participation in society. Nano Berberian spoke on "The Christians in Lebanon." He presented the view of the Armenian Apostolic Church on the witness to the Christian faith in the framework of the democratic and pluralistic values of Lebanon. Until the emergence of political Islam and all shades of fundamentalism, the Christians in Lebanon enjoyed a mutual respect with Muslims regarding religious freedoms and rights. This was aided, especially as regards the Armenians, by their neutral stance during the civil war in Lebanon, in which the Armenian Christians passionately defended democratic values for all religions, contending that only through mutual respect and mutual acceptance could they achieve a better quality of life and give hope for spiritual salvation. In this perspective, the Armenian Church in the region witnesses to the fact that the Christians of Lebanon and throughout the Middle East need a Church of the people and for the people, embodying the values of the Christian faith for all oppressed people.

The first afternoon session featured **Dr. Audeh Quawwas**, MD, former Member of Parliament in Jordan, **Ms. Nora Kort**, president of the Arab Orthodox Society in Jerusalem, and **Mr. Bishara Ebeid**, doctoral candidate in theology in Nazareth. Dr. Audeh Quawwas discussed "Christians in Jordan." Having presented some historical information about the presence of Christians in Jordan, he explored the recognized Christian denominations (Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Maronite, etc.) and religious communities (Protestant Free Church, etc.) of the area. Christians in Jordan are living in a friendly environment where they have freedom of expression (participation in worship, observance of

major Christian holidays, etc.), participation in economic and social life, and an adequate number of educational institutions, hospitals, and religious sites, while they are given special mention in current legislation on public education and the law on marriage, which is influenced by Islamic law. The speaker also mentioned some burning issues that remain unresolved regarding the presence and witness of Christians in the region, such as the absence of a National Council of Churches in Jordan. Nora Kort spoke about "Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem." The Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem can illuminate to a fair extent the historical significance of Jerusalem through the centuries. She also described who are considered to be Palestinian Christians, their identity and the reality of their lives, focusing on the reasons for emigration, and providing some personal testimonies and a message of hope and faith. Bishara Ebeid talked about "Palestinian Christians in Israel." This paper aimed to present the contemporary reality of Christians living in Israel, describing the situation from various perspectives, while also connecting it with the broader Middle East. The text presented the personal testimony of a Christian who lives in Israel, but also at the same time a theologian who does not hesitate to criticize what is wrong. The speaker's goal was to analyze the current situation while attempting to offer a voice of hope for a better and more fruitful future.

The speakers for the last session were **Stavros Zoumboulakis**, Director of the Journal "Nea Estia" and Chairman of the Board of the foundation "Artos Zois," and **Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis**, Director of the Academy for Theological Studies and lecturer at the University of Thessaly and the St. Sergius Institute of Orthodox Theology in Paris. Stavros Zoumboulakis developed the theme "Vocation and Witness of Christians in Palestine." What does it mean to be a Christian in Gaza today, and what does it entail? How can someone live the Christian faith in this area of suffering, poverty, and violence from Hamas? The speaker highlighted the important testimony of Manuel Musallam, Palestinian Catholic priest and pastor of the 200 Catholic Christians of Gaza, amongst 1,500,000 Muslims. Dr. Pantelis Kalaitzidis delivered a paper entitled "In the place of a conclusion: Christians in the Middle East: Building Bridges between East and West, between the Old and the New." The presentation dealt with how a Greek Orthodox perceives the presence and witness of Christians in the Middle East, what he/she should expect, and what concerns he/she should have for them. Having noted the positive and hopeful aspects of the situation (e.g., that Christianity in Middle Eastern countries usually represents the modern and new, renewal and progress), he also highlighted the disturbing signs that exist simultaneously (such as the socialistic and not simply social composition of the Christian communities, the emergence of strong ancient and patriarchal elements, the ecclesiastical culturalism, i.e. the understanding of the Church's faith in terms of identity and culture, etc.).

After the completion of the last session there was sufficient time for an all-inclusive debate on issues that emerged during the conference. The program Director of the WCC, Michel Nseir, Bishop Athenagoras of Sinope, Metropolitan Ignatios, and other attendees also put forth their own concluding views, and there were several useful

addendums moving toward specific proposals and solutions to the various problems facing the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East.

The participants came away from the conference with a renewed sense of the importance of bridging gaps between different ecumenical families, including the need for greater dialogue among the churches in the Middle East and between Christians in the East and the West. The future of Christian presence in the Middle East, the cradle of Christian history, is a pressing concern for the global Christian community.