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THE NEW JERUSALEM: AN ORIENTAL CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to revisit the controversial issue of the City of Jerusalem from a new perspective. The author will benefit from his experience and background to present the view of Oriental Christians toward the issue. This view will include the spiritual understanding of the "new Jerusalem" that is completely separate from the physical city of Jerusalem but that sheds light on the Christian approach to conflicts in general. Then the paper will review the political, technical, and human challenges that are facing the current negotiations and any possible future solutions, based on the analysis of the literature and declared positions. Finally, the paper presents the specific view and concerns of the Oriental Christians and the role they ought to play, concluding with some reflections and personal remarks. In all, this paper adds to the literature a new oriental Christian spiritual and academic perspective that has been shyly presented so far.

Key words: New Jerusalem; Oriental Christians; Peace Process; Vatican-Israeli Relations; Heavenly Kingdom

"I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband"
Revelation 3: 12

It is a known fact that the city of Jerusalem is a common Holy site for all three monotheistic religions and that makes it from a political science perspective, one of the most difficult hurdles to be overcome in the "final stage" negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians that are supposed to end one of the longest conflicts of our present times. However, what increases the complexity of the negotiation is that the two parties in conflict are not the only stakeholders that have declared interest in the status of Jerusalem but also a wide range of religious institutions and countries that encompass majorities of Christians

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and Muslim and obviously the Vatican. Jerusalem has a special sacred image in the heart of every Jewish, Christian and Muslim individual believer including me as Melkite Catholic Lebanese Political Scientists, which gives it and its resulting status a very important moral and ethical symbolism in addition to the political one. Thus, in this paper, I will present my view of the Jerusalem issue, based on the official position of the Catholic Church, to the heritage of Oriental Christian Churches, and on a political science approach culminating from my previous studies on the self determination rights for minorities, accommodation systems, human rights and conflict resolution.

Old vs. New Jerusalem

In the bible both old and new testament, Jerusalem has a very central role in the salvation plan of God. It is the Promised Land in which God is worshiped and his kingdom is built. It is the place where Jesus will be received as king and savior. It is also the place where he will be crucified, killed and on the third day resurrected. After Christ, Jerusalem will be the incubator of the first Church and the center of Christianity from which the disciples will go around the world spreading the Good News. Jerusalem will also host the first Council of the Church in which the disciples with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with Christ's teaching will declare the universal nature of the Church and its detachment from any material, human, ethnic or political limitation.

With this the religious significance of Jerusalem was officially ended, and the physical city after that had no religious significance beyond being a place for pilgrimage honoring the sights where Jesus, lived, walked, preached, was tortured, was crucified, died and was resurrected. Christ's teachings made it clear that no physical places, no particular people and no political arrangements are imperative to his salvation plan, or to the church's work and continuity, nor in his second coming. Therefore all theories and fantasies about the Church's need to control the holy sites of Jerusalem and establish a specific setting to prepare the second coming of Christ are mere fantasies of people who missed the whole message of Jesus and the whole bases of his salvation plan.

With Christ, all earth and every human being are the aim of his salvation and the home of the Holy Spirit. Christians and their Church are not linked with any mundane settings because they are in mere passage here and their aim, their aspiration and their only home is Heaven. Thus, the Church tradition and teachings based on Christ's Teaching, the Book of Revelation, the work of the Apostles and the heritage of all the Saints talk no longer about the physical city of Jerusalem but about "The New Jerusalem".

Far from claiming to be a theologian, my understanding of the New Jerusalem makes it not linked in any way to the physical city of Jerusalem. In comparison to the church teaching on Virgin Mary being the New Eve who replace

the Old Eve and was the exact antithetic. The Old Eve was a full partner in the original sin and the dooming of the human kind, while Mary the New Eve was a full partner in the restoration of the bond with God and in the salvation humankind. Similarly, in complete antithetic of the Old Jerusalem that rejected Jesus and killed him, the New Jerusalem is the symbol of every city, land, house, family and soul that will accept Jesus and embrace his love and salvation.

The Political Challenge

Saying that the New Jerusalem of the revelation (i.e. of the second coming of Christ) has nothing to do with the city of Jerusalem does not mean that the later doesn't have any significance to Christians and to the Vatican. On the contrary, the city of Jerusalem has a very special status described by Pope John Paul II in a 1984 Apostolic letter entitled "Redemptionis Anno" by saying "Christians honor her with a religious and intent concern because there the words of Christ so often resounded, there the great events of the Redemption were accomplished: the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord". Furthermore, the Vatican recognized the universal significance of the city beyond the Christian believers to include all the Abrahamic descendants and that has a great moral spiritual value for Christians, Jews and Muslims at the same time, which gives it a sacred character for all humankind. Thus, and based on this sacred character of the city the Vatican sought over the past 2000 years to have a presence in the city, a share in its management and full political/military control when possible. The latest arrangement was with the Ottoman authorities in 1757 and it was known of the "Status Quo". The Status Quo of 1757 organized the relation of the church with the official authorities but also the relations among the different Christian churches and communities to avoid frequent clashes (Stevens 1981, p.105).

The current complex situation in Jerusalem that causes daily clashes, violence, and death first arouse when one of the three monotheistic religions to whom the city has great value decided to have exclusive control over it. The deterioration of the situation in Jerusalem has been negatively related to the development of the Zionist plan to establish the Jewish State of Israel. Since the beginnings of the Zionist movement in the middle of the 19th century, the Zionist position on Jerusalem has ascended in toughness, rigidity and complexity based on the policy of "fact on the ground" and changing the status quo by force. On the other hand, the church's position has remained constant with some minor fluctuation adapting to the political realities on the ground.

The position of the church formulated gradually over the past 150 years is very clear on the theoretical level: Not only should Jerusalem due to its sacred character to the three monotheistic religions be outside any political arrangements and division, it should be playing the exact opposite role of an arena for meeting, reconciliation, peaceful co-existence and shared values. As for the

practical policy to preserve this character and make this view of the city feasible, there was many attempts and many suggestions that had to be adapted to the realities on the ground. Stevens (1981) identifies three stages of Vatican policy towards the status of Jerusalem since the early developments of the Zionist theory and first settlements. The first phase (pre-WWII) being expressing concern that the implementation of the Belfour Declaration encouraging Jewish settlement and giving them a predominant status would inflict a change of character of the Holy Places and an uprooting of the local Christian community. The second phase according to Stevens (1945-1967) is the Vatican's insistence and lobbying through the newly established United Nations on the internationalization of Jerusalem as the only possible way to preserve the city's special character[2]. The third phase according to Stevens is after the 1967 war as the Vatican realized more and more everyday that the "facts on the ground" are not going to be easy to change and that no solution for Jerusalem can be achieved without the consent of Israel. Thus the third tactical change of the Vatican position (post-1967) was to admit the existence of Israel and work on with it to insure some form of special status for the Holy City. The Vatican had to confine itself to a functional internationalization while keeping to criticize the unilateral Israeli moves creating new facts and pre-empting any further discussion of the issue[3].

After the end of the Cold War and the launching of peace process, and with the signature of many peace agreements with Israel, hopes were revived about finding a reasonable solution for the issue of Jerusalem. During that period the relations between Israel and the Holy See took a more formal aspect and this development culminated to a official recognition and exchange of diplomatic relations in 1993. Many people suggest that there was some kind of a political deal in which the Vatican would recognize the state of Israel in return of Israel's acceptance of a Catholic special status in Jerusalem and a place at the negotiation table for the "final status" of the city as one of the stakeholders (Magister 2003; Bainerman 2006; Paulson 2009).

Lamdan, once the Israeli Ambassador to the Holy See, criticized the position of the Vatican for being restricted to four words: "internationally guaranteed special statute" without any further clarifications, details or modalities (Magister 2003). However, with the fall apart of peaceful negotiations and the deterioration of the situation on the ground, the cleavage between Israel and the Holy See grew wider, in spite of Papal visits and many meetings. The Vatican could not remain silent toward the atrocities committed by both parties and the serious aggres-

2 In fact the UN partition plan of 1947 included an international administration of Jerusalem. Another resolution by the UN General Assembly was adopted in 1949 calling for the placement of Jerusalem under a permanent international regime as a "Corpus Separatum", administered by the UN for ten years. However these efforts and plans remained ideas on papers as they were rejected by the Arab states and overridden by the Jewish occupation of greater lands during the consecutive wars.

3 The Vatican was one of the major supporter and promoter of UN Security Council Resolution 478 (adopted on 20 April 1980) which declared the Israeli "Basic Law" on Jerusalem to be "null and void" (Kobti 1997).

sion of Israel aiming at changing the nature and identity of Jerusalem and claiming its Jewishness and exclusive control over it. Today negotiations on Jerusalem are completely blocked, and Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem (occupied by force during the 1967 war) which is illegal under international law[4] is still going on uninterruptedly. Hopes for a peaceful settlement that is conforming to the persistent Vatican view seem fading away and the process a very long way to go.

Beyond the Vatican position is the position of the different Christian communities living in the region is very much similar. This position was reflected in a very important memorandum issued in 1994 by the leaders of the communities that have a presence in Jerusalem[5]. In this document the leaders expressed their position in: rejecting all exclusivity claims, the need to preserve the Christian existence with the existing rights and privileges, confirming the right of free movement and access to all pilgrims from all different religions, and a special status for Jerusalem that assures all of the above with International guarantees. (Memorandum 1994)

The Technical Challenge

Without going in to the details of the different proposed projects, as this is not the aim or approach of this article, it is important to mention what are the basic challenges that are facing a possible solution from a technical dimension after exploring the political challenges. Kollek the Jewish ex-mayor of Jerusalem, expressed frequently his moral and emotional attachment to the unity of the city and he argues for its acceptance as an open city for all pilgrims but definitely under Israeli control (1981). Practically speaking and in both discourses of Palestinians and Israelis Jerusalem is claimed as a capital city. It is claimed to be the capital of both political entities, while the Vatican as mentioned calls for the internationalization of the Holy Places. Looking realistically at these claims especially with the drop in enthusiasm about forming one state with both people as equal citizens, produced a conviction of the international community for many years that the city should be divided into two parts, where each part would be a symbolic capital for the respective states. But is this feasible? And who will control the Holy Places in the old city? And what will happen with the growing settlements in east Jerusalem?

These technical questions are big hurdles that will be very difficult to overcome in any future negotiations and therefore this paper will not claim to present

4 Population settlement in occupied territory intended to change the popular identity of the land is rejected by several international laws including the Hague Convention of 1907, Geneva IV convention. Settlement in Jerusalem specifically violates the related UN resolutions 194, 242 and 338. (Kobti 2001).

5 The signatories of the document include: Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Latin Patriarch, Armenian Patriarch, Custos or the Holy Land, Coptic Archbishop, Syriac Archbishop, Ethiopian Archbishop, Anglican Bishop, Greek-Catholic Patriarchal-Vicar, Lutheran Bishop, Maronite Patriarchal-Vicar and the Cath. Syriac Patriarchal-Vicar (Memorandum, 1994).

a solution but just to shed light on some related issues. The only possible division line will have to be based on the 1948 demarcation line with minor adjustments. This will put western Jerusalem under Israeli control and eastern Jerusalem under Palestinian control. This will also mean that all added Israeli settlements in east Jerusalem will have to be treated like the settlements in the west bank and suffer the same consequences. Emmett (1996) presents a good academic approach to the meaning and function of a "capital". He argues that Jerusalem does not need to be a capital in the traditional sense of having preeminence, wealth, protected stronghold and center of power, because it is not and cannot be so for either parties due to its geographic, demographic and political status. However, with the new trend of creating and building new capitals like (Canberra, Brasilia, New Delhi, Washington DC, Ottawa, etc…) in order to fulfill a specific duty or give a specific symbolism, Emmett argues Jerusalem can be such a symbolic capital for both states. Jerusalem can be a centre of decision making and organizational function without having the traditional nature of capitals, but more importantly it can play the very important role of a symbol of national identity and unity of the people, which is already true and valid description for both peoples. Whether an untied Jerusalem will be the capital for a united country or the two parts of Jerusalem will be two capital cities for two independent countries, Jerusalem can and does fulfill this modern role of capital cities.

As for the Holy Places or the Old city per say, it's too small and too complex to be divided and the sanctuaries are too interconnected and may be of value to more than one religion in the same time. This reality, among other factors contributed in shaping the Vatican position (constant since 1922) calling for the internationalization of the Holy Places and removing them from the political turmoil, based mainly on the idea that:

"the Holy See is not involved in knowing if the city has to be the capital of one or two states… [it] wants to preserve the uniqueness of the most sacred parts of the city… so that in the future neither of the parties and none of the three religions can claim them exclusively of themselves, because they are part of the patrimony which belongs to the whole world" (Tauran 1999)

The Israeli position however, rejects not only questioning the settlements but also any division of the city in the first place and it has passed many laws in the Knesset considering the unified Jerusalem as the final, eternal and undivided capital of the state.

The Human Challenge

Regardless of how feasible is a political solution for Jerusalem and whether the Vatican's vision would be achieved or not, a Christian approach must have a greater concern than the control over the church buildings, museums, lands and stones. The center of Christianity and the main focus is the human and his

wellbeing before anything else. All the efforts of the Church are supposed to be aimed at the betterment of the status of people. Thus, the expressed concern of the Holy See is the people of Jerusalem of all three monotheistic religions and both nationalities and their peaceful coexistence. Vatican official have frequently articulated their view of Jerusalem as a "universal symbol of fraternity and peace… a sign of encounter between peoples" (Tauran 1999). Msgr Tauran explains further: "The Holy places are not museums and monuments for the tourists, they are places where communities of believers live, with their schools, cultures, charitable institutions, etc… and they have to be safeguarded in their sacrality and permanence". Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Sabah also focuses on this approach of the problem by saying in a national convention in 1997:

"Despite its political and military unification, Jerusalem today is divided. The two people are deeply separated by the conflict [and this is] obvious in the faces and hearts of both peoples… Jerusalem is important, but the living people in it, are just as important. Its geographic unity is important, but the human unity of its two peoples is just as important… every political formulation, if it is to last and take effect for a long future, must take the living people into consideration…" (cited in Kobti 1997)

When approaching this particular view of Jerusalem some serious issues seem to be blocking the way. The first issue that must be taken into consideration is that "age-old and deeply felt emotions are encrusted over the rationality necessary to find solutions" (Kollek 1981). Two people and three monotheistic religions consider Jerusalem as a place of great emotional, spiritual and divine value that cannot be compromised and thus it is difficult for all stakeholders to accept losing control over their Holy Places. Secondly, although the suffering has been disproportional in favor of Palestinians, both peoples have suffered tremendous pain and frustration over long years, and the longer are the years of bad experience the more difficult it will be to overcome the resulting feelings, grudges and divisions. Moreover, whichever political solution may be reached will not be applicable or will not solve the problem if it did not give enough attention and focus to the issue of reconciliation among the different communities living in the city. Both of these problems and realities are severely exacerbated by the claim of exclusivity that parties are using concerning the ownership of Jerusalem. Dropping this "exclusivity" claim may actually be the first pre-requisite for any negotiations, and all parties need to admit that the other has some kind of rights in the city. A third issue of great concern is the decrease in the Christian population of Palestine in general and of Jerusalemites in particular that is taking a dramatic rate (Stevens 1981, pp.109-110; Tauran 1999). This is a really alarming issue for the Vatican and for every Christian believer around the world because the Christian Holy Places without the Christians are mere museums with no life or meaning to them.

Oriental Christians' Vocation

For Oriental Christians or members of native local churches also view the existence of the Christian community from a broader more existential point. For them Jerusalem "is not only a Holy City, but also their native city where they live…" (memorandum 1994) which makes them special Christians with a special vocation of witnesses to Christ in the land of Christian origin and to be messenger of peaceful co-existence, love, sharing and cooperation to achieve justice and righteousness. The letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East of 1991 cited and adopted by the Maronite Synod (2008, p.73) clearly reflects this position by saying: "the Christians of the East are an integral part of the cultural identity of Muslims, just as Muslims in the East are an integral part of the cultural identity of the Christians. Therefore, we are responsible for each other before Goad and history". Which means that, an Oriental Christian living outside his original home as well as an east without its Christians, both have a very serious handicap that hinders them from fulfilling their vocation and God's plan for them (Fahed 2008, pp. 46-47).

The same applies to Jerusalem that is called upon by the fathers of the Christian Churches to be like the rest of the region to reject exclusivist positions and be welcoming and open to all, shared by all who are fondly attached to it. Whoever governs Jerusalem is called to make it the capital of humankind base don the Holy Scripture describing it as "the city of Justice, faithful city" (Is. 1,26-27) "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is. 2,2) whose "gates are always open" (Is. 11) with "peace as magistrate and justice as government" (Is, 17). The scripture also presents Jerusalem as a city that God will put in the middle of the nations (Ez 5,5) and whoever tries to conquer it for himself shall be defeated (Zech 12:3). (Memorandum 1994).

The vocation of Oriental Christians and their whole raison d'être is to be messengers of peace, reconciliation, coexistence and the culture of life, sanctifiers of their space and time which is in most need of this. This must be, is today and should continue to be their positions and their stand in the different conflict, and any convergence from this will be fatal to them and to their brethrens. Such a position is the antithesis of all exclusivity claims, apartheid style separation policies and searching for solutions by force and thus its continuity is necessary not only for the survivor of Christians but also to keep the chance of peace in the region alive.

Final Reflections

After this quick overview, some basic principles come up as pre-requisite conditions for any settlement of the issue of Jerusalem, and these seem to be

common among many authors (Wilson 1969; Stevens 1981; Ferrari 1985; Tauran 1999; Kobti 2000).

First, the following actions are completely rejected and will lead to the deterioration of the situation rather than pushing for a solution: all forceful action aiming to change the demography and the identity of the land; all attacks and aggressions against civilians whoever is the perpetrator; exclusivity claim or excluding one or more of the stakeholders are also rejected; closing the city in front of people and/or pilgrims based on security excuses; closing the economic and social prospective in a way that leads to emigration and consequently demographic changes; putting restriction on religious expression of traditions and rituals. Unfortunately, it is clear that the current de-facto authority and whose responsibility is to avoid all of the above is in reality the one that is initiating all these problem and putting all these hurdles in front of peace.

Second, the city has an important significance for two peoples and three monotheistic religions and thus all five entities should be equal partners in developing a solution. Including all these in the administration of the city is a necessity and noting the first point mentioned above, giving the city a special legal status internationally guaranteed. This special status may include the whole city of Jerusalem but if this turns out to be unfeasible, it should include the Old City and the Holy Places.

Third, serious attention should be given to the living people of the city and major efforts should target the reconciliation and the brotherly coexistence of the different communities because the Holy Places without their people are mere empty, cold museums that have lost their life and significance. Pope John Paul II explains that the Holy See has done all what is has done: "because it is concerned with peace among peoples no less than for spiritual, historical and cultural reasons… not only the monuments or the sacred places, but the whole historical Jerusalem and the existence of religious communities".

Eventually, if Jerusalem is ever to regain its special status that all stakeholders believe in, it must embrace its destiny and re-become a place for convergence of a pluralism of historical and religious rights, preserving the legitimate aspirations of the people of the three monotheistic. The adopted solution must take account of "the exigencies of this special character of the city, unique in all the world, as a crossroad of conciliation and peace".

Finally and most importantly, it is the understanding of the great majority of Christian and the clear position of the Catholic church that the return of the Jews, the re-establishment of Israel and the re-conquest of Jerusalem "have no special theological significance… they are not to be seen as signs pointing forward to the second coming of Christ" (Chapman 2010). The anticipation of the New Heavenly Jerusalem proclaimed in the revelation is a spiritual event to which every Christian should prepare himself not through war, conquests and separations but through redemption, reconciliation bringing him closer to God

and to our fellow human beings.

The New Jerusalem, the Jerusalem that I as Christian Catholic Melkite believer aim for and aspire to is the fulfillment of the vision of peace, the image of the new creation and the aspirations of all peoples. It is the sanctification of every space and time I am living in and make it ready to embrace the heavenly kingdom where "God will wipe away all tears… [and] there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away" (Rev 21,4).

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Ели Ал Хинди

НОВИ ЈЕРУСАЛИМ: ЈЕДНА ОРИЈЕНТАЛНО ХРИШЋАНСКА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА

Резиме

Овај рад је покушај преиспитивања контроверзног питања града Јерусалима из нове перспективе. Аутор има прилику да служећи се сопственим искуством прикаже поглед оријенталних хришћана на ово питање. Овај поглед укључује духовно схватање „новог Јерусалима" које је у потпуности одвојено од града Јерусалима у физичком смислу, али које расветљава хришћански приступ конфликтима уопште. Затим ћемо пружити преглед политичких, техничких и људских изазова са којима се суочавају текући преговори и свако могуће решење у будућности, заснованих на анализи литературе и декларисаних позција. Коначно, рад представља специфичан поглед и место и улогу оријенталних хришћана, те бива завршен неким размишљањима и личним закључцима. Све у свему, литератури додаје једну нову, до сада стидљиво приказивану, оријентално хришћанску и академску перпективу.

Кључне речи: Нови Јерусалим, оријентални хришћани, мировни процес, Ватиканско-израелски односи, Царство Божје.

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