# The Challenges of Christian Ecumenism in Israel and Palestine

30.04.2014 | Paul Parker

**The following article by Paul Parker about the diversity and vitality of Christians in Palestine and Israel was written for and published in "Sightings", an online journal of the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School. For further reference please see the editorial remarks down at the end of page. (JCR)**

The diversity and vitality of Christians in Palestine and Israel is startling if one takes into account the presence of all Christians from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. These Christians live in one of the more challenging areas of the world working out a dynamic ecumenical vision of which few in the West are aware.

Christians in Israel and Palestine include: 1. Hebrew-speaking Palestinian-Arab Israelis who belong to one of the thirteen traditional Palestinian Churches (see author's note in the References section), 2. Palestinians who belong to one of the thirteen Churches, 3. Palestinian-Arab Israeli and Palestinian Protestants who belong to newer evangelical denominations, 4. Messianic Jews who do not consider themselves Christians but who are committed to Jesus Christ as their savior, 5. Russian-Israeli Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, 6. migrant workers—largely from the Philippines and an undetermined number from Latin-America, 7. asylum seekers from Africa, 8. expatriates employed by, or volunteering in, churches, NGOs and foreign governments, and 9. millions of tourists and pilgrims.

Reports about Christians in Palestine and Israel typically focus on the thirteen traditional Palestinian churches, but these reports are misleading. They barely give a nod to other Christians and to the newer Protestant arrivals—Baptist Palestinians are the largest Protestant denomination and outnumber the Anglicans and Lutherans combined.

Most Israeli and Western sources under-count Russian-Israeli Christians. Yet, these Christians may comprise the largest national group in Israel. These sources also dismiss Messianic Jews as irrelevant in number, and omit Christian expats entirely although many have lived in Palestine or Israel for years and sometimes decades. Eleven of the thirteen Heads and Patriarchs of the traditional Palestinian Churches are expatriates who live and work in Israel as guest workers not citizens

Under-counted as well are pilgrims with undeniable economic and political influence, Christian-African asylum seekers who want to live in peace, and Christian migrant workers who speak fluent Hebrew and work for low wages without job security to provide for their families in their home countries. An accurate count of Christians in Israel and Palestine is difficult. A close approximation appears below:

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|---|---|
| 1. Palestinian-Arab Israelis (no Russian-Israelis) | 115,000 |
| 2. Palestinians (Gaza & West Bank) | 51,710 |

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|---|---|
| 3. Palestinian evangelicals (Israeli & Palestinian) | 3,500 |
| 4. Messianic Jews* | 5,000 – 20,000 |
| 5. Russian-Israelis* | 23,000 – 500,000 |
| 6. Filipino and Latin-American migrant workers* | 40,000 – 100,000 |
| 7. Asylum Seekers | 40,000 |
| 8. Expatriates | Uncounted thousands |
| | 2,278,210 – 3,105,210 |
| Total population | |

- Population of Israel: 8,081,000
- Jewish population of Israel: 6,066,000
- Population of Palestine: 4,421,000 (97% Sunni Muslim)

*Estimates vary widely for these categories due to the individuals' legal status, their self-understanding, and the ideology of those who provide the statistics.

The Church has a significant presence in Israel and Palestine. It is diverse, international, and influential with the potential for greater influence. Nonetheless, in Israel where state and religion are intertwined and in Palestine where the state struggles for sovereignty, Christians experience social inequality, legal discrimination, limited resources, few options for development, and truncated political power. And to sprinkle salt in the wounds, many international Christian tourists come and go, unaware, indifferent, or with uncloaked disdain for Palestinian Christians and Palestinian-Arab Israeli Christians.

At the grassroots level, Christians belonging to the traditional Palestinian Churches live and work together in warm ecumenism even if some of their leaders do not demonstrate the same commitment to interdenominational cooperation nor to justice, freedom, and equality. And, although Christians of the thirteen Palestinian Churches maintain good relations with each other, most members of these Churches have little contact with non-Palestinian Christians living in Israel, and tenuous ecumenical relationships with Palestinian Christians who are not members of the thirteen Churches (e.g., Baptists and Pentecostals).

The ecumenical challenge in Palestine and Israel is not limited to thirteen traditional churches or to all of the Christians living in this region. It is a challenge for Christians worldwide.

Some of the Christians living in Palestine and Israel are showing the rest of the world the way, if we will follow rather than try to lead.

How so?

In Israel, the Rev. Fr. David Mark Neuhaus SJ and seven other priests minister to migrant workers, African asylum seekers, and the Hebrew and Russian-speaking Catholic communities, which include many Palestinian-Arab Israelis. While some might argue that Catholics ministering to Catholics is hardly ecumenical, their ethnic, international, cultural, economic, and legal differences argue otherwise.

In Palestine, Bethlehem Bible College (with Baptist origins), and Bethlehem University (a Catholic Lasallian institution) frequently host international scholars and conferences that address issues of ecumenism, equality, peace, and justice.

Also, crossing state and ecclesiastic lines, the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Kairos Palestine, the Diyar Consortium, and the Jerusalem Interchurch Centre are ecumenical, independent, locally respected, and internationally recognized organizations that bridge ecclesiastic structures and cultural divides.

If Christians in the United States want to unite the Church and work for peace in Palestine and Israel, they could hardly do better than to visit, support, and join the labor of their brethren in this region.

**Resources and Further Reading:**

Ateek, Naim, Cedar Duaybis and Maurine Tobin, eds. *The Forgotten Faithful: A Window into the Life and Witness of Christians in the Holy Land*. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Theology Center, 2007.

Collings, Rania Al Qass, Rifat Odeh Kassis and Mitri Raheb, eds. *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank: Facts, Figures and Trends.* 2nd Revised Edition. Bethlehem: Diyar Publishers, 2012.

McGahern, Una. *Palestinian Christians in Israel: State Attitudes Towards Non-Muslims in a Jewish State.* New York: Routledge, 2011.

Mansour, Johnny, ed. *Arab Christians in Israel: Facts, Figures and Trends*. Bethlehem: Diyar Publishers, 2012.

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Neuhaus, David Mark. “Jewish Israeli Attitudes towards Christianity and Christians in Contemporary Israel.” In *World Christianity: Politics, Theology, Dialogues*, edited by Mahoney and M. Kirwan, 347-369. London: Melisende Press, 2004.

Sabella, Bernard. *Palestinian Christians in Palestine and Israel: Challenges of Transition and Identity*. An unpublished paper. 2013.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The thirteen traditional Churches in Israel and Palestine are grouped into four families.

1. The first family is comprised of (1) the Greek or Eastern Orthodox Church, which includes Russian and Rumania Orthodox Churches.
2. The second family is comprised of four non-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox churches sometimes called monophysite churches that rejected the two-nature/one-person Christology of the 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451 CE: (2) Armenian, (3) Syrian, (4) Coptic, and (5) Ethiopian.
3. The third family is Catholic and includes six churches: (6) the Latin Catholic Church, (7) Maronite Catholic Church, (8) Greek Catholic Church or Melkites, (9) Armenian Catholic Church, (10) Syrian Catholic Church, and (11) the Custos or Franciscan Custodians of the Holy Land.
4. And the fourth family is Protestant, traditionally known as Evangelicals, and includes: (12) Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and (13) the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East.

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