

**Christians and Christianity in the Jewish State**  
**Israeli Policy towards the Churches and the Christian**  
**Communities (1948-2010)**

Amnon Ramon

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© 2012, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies  
The Hay Elyachar House  
20 Radak St., 92186 Jerusalem

<http://www.jiis.org>  
E-mail: [machon@jiis.org.il](mailto:machon@jiis.org.il)

## *Summary*

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity is unique, with Jews and Christians having a mutual affinity not seen in other religions. Christianity emerged during the 1st century CE from within the Jewish world and, like Judaism, sanctifies the Hebrew Bible, regarding it as the first part of the Holy Scriptures. Among other consequences, this shared foundation has resulted in a perception of the land of Israel as the Holy Land and of Jerusalem as a holy city and thus a major pilgrimage destination.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 posed a complex theological challenge to the churches: How should they regard the success of the Jewish People, who – according to traditional Christian interpretation – had been punished with exile and humiliation, yet ultimately succeeded in founding a sustainable Jewish state in the Holy Land? The Six-Day War and the surprising events that followed – the Israeli conquest of Bethlehem and East Jerusalem, which house most of Christianity’s holy places as well as the centers of the different churches in the Holy Land – aroused concerns among local churches and Christian communities as well as international Christian entities. For the first time, the holy places of Christianity were under the control of a state that Christians of all denominations identified with Judaism, the defeated “Synagoga,” out of which Christianity – the victorious “Ecclesia” and spiritual heir of “carnal Israel” – had emerged.

These residual historical and religious vestiges did not, however, affect only the Christian world. The leaders of Israel – the state of the Jewish People, who for centuries had been a minority dependent on the good will of Christian and Muslim rulers – unintentionally became the “Caesar” responsible for matters relating to the local Christian communities, their holy places, and the vast church property located within the territory of the new state. Most of the state’s leaders were aware of the influence that residual historical and religious memories had on the Christian world’s attitude towards Israel. At the same time they were also captives of the image that Christianity and the Christian world had in the eyes of Jews. Most Christians in Israel were Arabs – whose loyalty Israel’s leaders doubted – a situation that further aggravated relations between Israel and the

local Christian communities. Matters became even more complicated in June of 1967, when, as noted, the Jewish state and its leaders became responsible for the most important holy places in East Jerusalem and Bethlehem. This reversal in the state of affairs, and the intricate and complicated relations that prevailed between the Christian world and the State of Israel during its first 62 years, are the principal focus of this book.

### **A. Israeli Policy towards Churches and Christian Communities, (1948-1967)**

Israel's relations with local churches and Christian communities and with the Christian world generally are particularly intricate and complicated. The issue is unique in the way in which it combines factors within various spheres of mutual influence: a) in the internal Israeli sphere – Israel's relations with the minority Christian communities, most of whose followers (some 90%) are Arabs, who consider themselves part of the Arab world surrounding Israel; b) in the sphere of Israel's foreign relations – Christian states and international entities (the foremost being the Vatican) that support churches in the Holy Land and the Middle East, whose existence and views Israel must take into account; c) in the broad historical and theological sphere, that is, the influence of historical relations between Jews and Christians – the dramatic changes that took place in the Catholic Church's attitude towards the Jewish People beginning in the early 1960s (following the Second Vatican Council and the "Nostra Aetate" declaration in October, 1965); and, finally, d) in the sphere of relations between Israel and the Diaspora – the nexus between Israeli relations with local Christian communities, on the one hand, and Jewish community life as a minority in Christian countries, on the other.

Until 1967 Israeli policy towards the churches and Christian communities was influenced by the historical Jewish animosity towards Christianity and the Christian world and by Jewish Israeli animosity towards the Arab minority. Many of Israel's leaders viewed this minority as part of the Arab world that aspires to destroy the State of Israel. Nonetheless, the Israeli government had to tone down its underlying hostile attitude towards Christian institutions for the sake of its foreign relations and because of its dependence on the Western Christian world. In practical terms this change of attitude was reflected in a number of important

areas such as the return of property, the granting of tax and customs exceptions, the granting of circumscribed autonomy to Churches, permitting the churches throughout Israel to maintain relations with the church centers in East Jerusalem, and permitting travel to holy places in Jordan, to name but some.

Church leaders saw these as rights that the ruling power was obligated to grant, in accordance with the status quo arrangements established during the Ottoman era. Yet these rights were never codified as law or established as obligatory norms, and as a result Israeli authorities were able to oversee church activities using the “carrot and stick” approach.

Established churches were therefore granted limited freedom of operation by the Israeli authorities. In contrast, non-institutionalized Protestant entities operating amidst the Jewish population had a harder time because of suspicions that they were engaged in missionary activities: their activities were very much restricted and confined, and they were subject to continuous monitoring by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and affiliated organizations that worked to combat missionary activity. And yet even with all the restrictions, churches and Christian entities were in a better situation than the Muslim religious establishment, which in fact had lost most of its resources (particularly income from Waqf properties) following the 1948 war and was completely dependent on the Israeli establishment.

A government resolution of June 1948 mandated the Christian Communities Department, which was established within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, to handle matters pertaining to churches and Christian communities. Many problems arose in the operation of this department: insufficient budget and personnel; lack of authority and the distribution of authority among other government ministries; and a hostile attitude towards churches and Christian entities on the part of the ministry’s leaders, who belonged to Israel’s national-religious political camp. A paradox was created when the ministry became one of the main bodies working against missionary activities and expansion of the Christian presence in Israel, while at the same time the Christian Communities Department that had been set up within the ministry was responsible for providing services to churches and Christian entities. It is worth noting that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior were more liberal towards the Christian presence in Israel, but they had relatively little influence.

Upon resolution of the main issues affecting relations between Israel and the churches (foremost among these being the church properties), and with decreased attention to the question of Jerusalem on the international agenda, relations between the state and local churches stabilized during the 1950s. No real improvement occurred, however, in relations with the Vatican, which did not forgive Israel for its refusal to accept the November 1947 plan for internationalization of Jerusalem, of which the Holy See had been a most prominent supporter.

Israeli policy towards the Christian institutions was inconsistent. The principle of “divide and conquer” prevailed, that is, separate negotiations with each of the churches. This policy was influenced by four key factors: the power of the states or international entities that supported the different local churches; the extent of a church’s “Arabness” and its leaders’ attitude towards Israel; the church’s engagement (or suspected engagement) in missionary activities within the Jewish population; and the size of the community and extent of its properties in Israel.

Israel’s staunchest rival during its first years was the Catholic Church under the leadership of the Vatican – primarily because of the difficult struggle over the status of Jerusalem and harsh Catholic criticism of Israel. Yet, paradoxically, it was precisely this rival that received preferred treatment from Israel, first and foremost because of the Vatican’s relative power and the support granted by the Catholic world to the Church and to its various entities in Israel. This situation galvanized the Arab Catholic communities – the Latin Church community and the Greek Catholic community – and in so doing undermined the Greek Orthodox community.

In contrast, no powerful states or international entities stood behind the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate or the Armenian Patriarchate. Israel could therefore pressure them to join its struggle against the Vatican opposing the internationalization of Jerusalem and compel them to lease or sell important lands and properties to Israeli bodies at a low price, particularly in West Jerusalem. These two patriarchates were completely dependent on Israel for the transfer of their income from properties in Israel to their centers in the Old City (under Jordanian rule) and were thus compelled to submit to Israeli pressure.

In its relations with the Anglican Church, Israel took advantage of the split and rivalry between the Arab community and its leaders, on the one side, and the Anglican Bishop, whose residence was in the Old City, on the other. The tense

relations between these two entities resulted from the question of ownership of church property and the Bishop's control over the Arab community, which aspired to independence. This situation made it possible for Israel to abide by the status quo of the Mandate period and to deny recognition of the Anglicans as a religious community. In this manner Israel also prevented increased Anglican missionary activity within the Jewish population.

The second Protestant entity – the German Evangelical Lutheran Church – suffered a most severe blow upon the establishment of the state. Under the shadow cast by the trauma of the Holocaust, this Church was in fact prevented from continuing to operate within the Green Line (the demarcation lines set out in the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and its neighbours). The Lutheran World Federation, which represented the Church, was compelled to sell most of the property of the Lutheran entities that had operated within the country up to the outbreak of World War II to the State of Israel at a symbolic price. It transferred its center of activities to Jordanian territory and provided assistance and rehabilitation for Palestinian refugees. Lutheran activities within the Green Line were drastically reduced: only two or three certified Scandinavian priests worked within Israel, yet their efforts to engage in activities amidst the Jewish population still provoked criticism and complaints on the part of the Israeli establishment and Jewish public opinion.

Israel's officialdom was generally considerate of the Christian establishment, but conditions for the country's Christian Arab citizens did not improve much, nor was the treatment they received significantly different from that of Muslims. This policy reinforced the Christian minority's identification with the Muslim minority. At the same time, however, the Christian minority – most of whom were urban-based and highly educated – was more aware of its oppression than was the Muslim minority. This awareness and its members' high level of education propelled the Christian minority not only to organize itself politically and achieve parliamentary representation (within both Zionist and Communist political parties) beyond its proportionate population in the Knesset (Israeli parliament), but also to emigrate to Western countries in ever-increasing numbers. These countries opened their gates to the Christian immigrants, particularly during the difficult years of recession in 1966-1967. The relatively low fertility rate among Christian Arabs in combination with their emigration generated concerns among

the Vatican and other international Christian entities that the State of Israel and the Holy Land would lose all their Christian residents and the holy places would become museums without living communities.

## **B. Relations between Israel and the Churches and the Question of Jerusalem, 1967-2007**

During the years following the Six Day War, Israel adopted a generally favorable approach towards the church institutions in East Jerusalem. The government sought to have the Christian entities,– both local and international,– serve as a moderating force in the face of nationalist Palestinian Muslims. In light of the hostility on the part of the Christian world (primarily the Vatican) towards Israeli rule in Jerusalem following the 1948 war and given widespread international opposition to the annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, Israel sought to prove to the Western Christian world, and foremost the Vatican, that the Christian holy places and communities would be able to flourish under Israeli rule. Israel promised to preserve peace in the holy places, to ensure their accessibility, and to prevent offending the feelings of the faithful. Israel also accepted the status quo arrangements regarding Christian holy places as formulated during the 19th century and the period of the British Mandate (with the exception of the dispute between the Copts and Ethiopians over Deir al-Sultan, where Israel supported the latter). It reimbursed the churches in Jerusalem for damages inflicted during the wars of 1948 and 1967 and rescinded the restrictions that had been placed on churches and church bodies under Jordanian rule.

The only area in which Israel demonstrated any flexibility – relative to its inflexible position regarding Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem – was on the matter of Christian holy places and the status of Christian communities. Against this background, in 1968 Israel and the Vatican undertook negotiations that focused on an Israeli proposal to grant special status to holy places and Christian community leaders, comparable to the status of diplomatic bodies, in exchange for Vatican restraint with respect to Israel's actions in Jerusalem. The Holy See was not satisfied with Israel's proposal and feared that an agreement (even if clandestine) with Israel would hurt Catholic communities in Arab and Muslim countries. The unrealized expectation of an agreement with the Vatican

also derailed potential agreements or official understandings with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Armenian Patriarchate. The failed negotiations notwithstanding, relations between Israel and the Vatican gradually improved, and in the early 1970s de facto diplomatic relations of a sort were established between the two.

A real transformation of relations between Israel and the church institutions only occurred with the outbreak of the first intifada in late 1987. Most local Christians increasingly identified with Palestinian nationalism and with the aspirations to dismantle the Israeli occupation for a number of reasons: increasing opposition to the occupation during the 1980s (in response to intensified construction of settlements in the West Bank, among other factors), growing Palestinian nationalism, the lack of an Israeli policy favoring the local Christian population, and, in particular, the status of Christians in the country as a religious minority with strong social and cultural ties to the relative Muslim majority within this society. The process of “Palestinization” and “Arabization” of Christian church leaders resulted in their first-ever public statements expressing opposition to the occupation and even supporting non-violent resistance to it. For the first time the heads of churches in Jerusalem published announcements explicitly condemning Israeli rule and the occupation.

Officially Israel continued to abide by the principles established in 1967: it allowed freedom of access and worship in the holy places for all religions and nationalities (more than any other entity that had governed Jerusalem) and called on religious leaders not to engage in politics but, rather, to focus on their religious role. The state did not adopt a policy favoring the local Christian population; their treatment was the same as that of the Muslim majority.

The Oslo process and the signing of the first tentative peace accords between Israel and the Palestinians, during 1993-1995, made the Christian issue a bargaining chip of sorts between the negotiating parties. During talks with Israel, the Palestinians insisted that the new Palestinian Authority (PA) be the custodian of the Christian communities and holy places. This matter was very important to the Palestinians leaders, who viewed it as a mechanism for reinforcing solidarity between Christians and Muslims and as a tool to strengthen the standing of the PA in global public opinion. In contrast, Israel did not attribute great importance to this matter and was willing to concede control over holy places and influence

in this area, without an in-depth exploration of the various Christian positions regarding such a concession or its implications in the international arena. The handling of Christian matters continued to deteriorate during the 1990s, culminating in 2000 when the Christian Communities Department found itself without a permanent office within the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In 2003 this ministry was dismantled and the Christian Communities Department was transferred to the Ministry of Interior, yet the change did not lead to a significant improvement in the handling of this sensitive and complex issue.

Concerned that the Christian issue would be marginalized in light of the rapid pace of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the heads of the Christian communities published a memorandum in 1994 in which they expressed their opposition to the exclusive rule by a single entity over Jerusalem. They called for a guarantee of the universal character of the city, including the status of holy places and the legitimate rights of Christians, by means of a special statute to be formulated by representatives of the three religions and the various political bodies within the city and guaranteed by the international community.

The hardships facing the Christian communities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem increased in the latter half of the 1990s with the difficulties that emerged during the peace process: terrorist attacks, the blockade that Israel imposed following these attacks, the outbreak of the second intifada (in late September 2000), and construction of the separation wall (beginning in 2003). The separation wall prevents local Christians who reside outside of Jerusalem from reaching holy places within the city (except during Christian holidays, when special transit permits are granted), and thus Jerusalem has in practical terms been disconnected from Christian centers of activity in Ramallah and Bethlehem. These severe hardships led to increased Christian emigration abroad, especially from Bethlehem. Christians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank were trapped in a struggle of opposing forces: the aspiration to identify with secular Palestinian nationalism, which many consider to be weakening and declining; pressures from Hamas and radical Islamic circles, whose influence within Palestinian society was rising; and pressure from the Israeli government.

Deteriorating relations between radical Islam and the Christian Western world since the 9/11 terror attacks in the US (2001) also affected developments in the Holy Land. Christian Arabs feared being identified by the Muslim majority as

representatives of the West, which is engaged in a struggle with Islam. In 2006, for example, in reaction to anti-Muslim comments in a speech by Pope Benedict XVI, Christian churches (including the Greek Orthodox and Anglican churches) within the territory of the PA were attacked, but churches located within East Jerusalem, which is under Israeli rule, were not.

The condition of Christians on the Israeli side, however, has not been particularly rosy either: in February 2005 Druze residents attacked Christian residents within the village of Maghar in the southern Galilee. The latter claimed that they did not receive adequate protection from the Israeli Police or Border Patrol. Members of the Islamic movement were planning to construct a large mosque in the square adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and only American pressure prevented implementation of these plans. During several holiday processions in Jerusalem in recent years ultra-orthodox yeshiva students in the Old City spat on Armenian clergy or on the cross they were carrying; and blasphemous writing was spray-painted on the walls of several churches and monasteries in the new sections of the city. Church leaders are doing their best to navigate among the powerful forces at work in the Holy Land, but this struggle for survival is becoming increasingly difficult.

Forty years after the euphoria of June 1967, relations between Israel and the churches have become even more intricate and complicated. Relations between the state and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate reached a crisis point and became rather tense following Israel's refusal to endorse the appointment of the elected patriarch, Theophilos III, apparently because of real estate deals undertaken by his predecessor, Irenaios I, with settlers' groups and other Israeli entities. Internal struggles and external pressures also contributed to a decline in the influence and power of this patriarchate, which has historically been considered the foremost Christian entity in the Holy Land.

The leaders of the Armenian Patriarchate have also been trying to navigate their way between the two parties to the conflict, but they have been unsuccessful in forestalling the emigration of young Armenians abroad (primarily to North America). The "liberal" established Protestant churches of the world (such as the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran Churches) and the entities subject to their influence have adopted an anti-Israel stance. They struggle against the occupation and the separation wall, among other means by undermining investments in

Israel and in companies that support the occupation, while fully identifying with the Palestinian side and equating the situation with South Africa's Apartheid rule, which collapsed as a result of international pressure among other factors. Some Jewish critics argue that the attitude of these churches is nothing less than a reincarnation of the old Christian anti-Semitism that does not recognize the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

Conversely, there exist evangelical Protestant entities from the American far right and the bodies that represent them in Jerusalem (such as the International Christian Embassy) that are extremely sympathetic to Israel and supportive of Israeli rule over East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Some of these even provide assistance to the settlements in Judea and Samaria and to Jewish groups engaged in activities related to the Temple Mount. This support has greatly angered local Arab churches, which have condemned it, fearing that the bond between Christian evangelists and Israel would further complicate their life within Muslim society. The Israeli establishment views these evangelical bodies rather favorably and largely ignores the tension generated between these bodies and members of American Jewry's liberal establishment, which opposes their increasing and conservative influence within the US.

The local leaders of the Catholic communities emphasize the place of Christians in the land as part of the Palestinian people, whom God appointed to bear living witness to the Gospel of Jesus amidst the Muslim and Jewish societies. The previous Latin Patriarch, Michel Sabbah, regarded the Israeli occupation as the source of the conflict that creates such hardship for local Christians. He called upon Israel's leaders to negotiate with the leaders of Hamas and upon the international community to pressure Israel to end the occupation and establish a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Sabbah's successor since June, 2008, Patriarch Fouad Twal, is more cautious about speaking out but also abides by the solution of two states for two peoples. In May 2010, on the eve of Pope Benedict XVI's visit, Twal characterized the difficult condition of the Christian Arab community in the region as follows: "What worries me most is the speech that the Pope will deliver here. One word from the Holy See in favor of the Muslims, and I'm in trouble. One extra word favoring Jews, and I'm in trouble again. At the end of the visit, the Pope will return to Rome, and I will remain to bear the consequences."

Surprisingly, the Vatican and the Catholic Church, which had been particularly hostile to Israel until 1967, have actually adopted a more balanced stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent years. To date the Vatican has refrained from joining the efforts of Protestant entities opposing the Israeli occupation. This balanced approach is the result of diplomatic ties that the Vatican established with Israel in 1994, the progress achieved in Jewish-Catholic dialogue, and perhaps also the rising concerns about the increase in power of radical, fundamentalist Islam in the Middle East and Europe.

The complex network of relations linking Israel to the church institutions and Arab communities was further complicated in recent years, internally and externally, with the addition of more entities: growing communities of messianic Jews who believe in Jesus but see themselves as part of the Jewish population of Israel; Christians who arrived in Israel amidst the waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and other countries, most of whom identify with the majority Jewish population; immigrant Christians granted the status of permanent residents or citizens of Israel, including priests and clergy who have long resided in Israel and the spouses of Israeli citizens; asylum seekers, refugees, and infiltrators, some of whom received official status within Israel and some of whom reside in the country with no legal status; labor migrants (foreign workers), who reside in Israel for short or long periods of time, some of whom have permits and some of whom have no legal status. The Christian presence in Israel has thus become more varied and complex, posing new challenges to the Israeli government and church institutions alike.

### **C. Current Relations between Israel and the Christian Churches and Communities: Problems and Challenges**

Israel's relations with the churches and the Christian world are among the most neglected issues in policy and in practice on the part of the state's governing bodies. As noted, this area includes internal Israeli issues (such as relations of the state with the Arab Christian population in Israel, with non-Arab Christian populations, and with foreign workers); and matters connected to Israel's foreign relations and its ties with international Christian bodies such as the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and evangelical entities, as well as with states that

are influenced by the churches, their organizations and Christian public opinion. The variety of relationships that Israel has with the Christian world is also known to influence other important areas such as the struggle against anti-Semitism and against efforts to de-legitimize Israel.

Another important topic involves the holy places, particularly the matters of status quo and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in which various countries are engaged (including France, Italy, Greece, Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia) through links to church bodies that operate in Israel and Jerusalem. In addition, Israel's treatment of Christians, churches, and Christian holy places can sometimes have a bearing on the standing of Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

Despite its importance, however, the entire subject of relations with Christianity, Christians, and the Christian world has been relegated to the bottom of Israel's list of priorities for a number of reasons: residual historical memories of relations between Jews and Christians; ignorance and lack of information; the growing influence of ultra-orthodox political parties (primarily Shas, which controls the Interior Ministry); the increasing power and influence of nationalist ultra-orthodox bodies as compared to the more moderate approach prevalent in the past within the religious Zionist camp; and in particular, the Israeli national agenda, which is overburdened with security, social, and economic problems.

A salient theme emerges from this book: the subject deserves much more attention from the Israeli government than it has received; actions and gestures on the part of the state in this sensitive area are likely to yield positive results, particularly during times of tension between Israel and the international community. In recent years a noteworthy trend has been visible among some of the church institutions, which have been seeking pathways to dialogue with Israel's Jewish society. Prominent among these are the Franciscans' "Custodia Terra Sanctae" and, to a certain extent, the Latin Patriarchate. We believe that this trend should be reinforced as it is clearly in Israel's interest. Moreover, some see a window of opportunity now for Israel to take cautious initiative on issues relating to Christianity, considering the current tension between fundamentalist Islamic sects and the Western world (led by the United States), including concerns about the growing strength of radical Islam in Europe. Towards this end Israel must shed the residual vestiges of past memories and free itself from the growing influence of the ultra-orthodox and nationalist ultra-orthodox establishments. Christian

communities and entities should be strengthened, yet this should be done in a cautious and intelligent way that does not alienate the Muslim community or increase tension with the orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jewish communities.

The researchers Moshe Hirsch and Deborah Housen-Couriel argued some 20 years ago that in light of the “foreign” aspect of church activities in Israel and considering the importance of this issue for the State of Israel, one might have expected that a single body would be appointed to handle all church issues. Their research revealed the disaggregated manner in which Christian issues were handled and the lack of a framework for consistent coordination and policy formulation. Since the publication of this research, management of Christian concerns has deteriorated and disaggregation of the responsible bodies has increased: the Christian Communities Department within the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which had coordinated management of these issues, was reduced, weakened, and eventually transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, where it has marginal standing; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has one official to handle this issue, in the framework of relations with other religions; no official government body has been appointed to oversee the important matter of dialogue between Israel and the Christian world, nor is there any evidence of coordination or collaborative planning with non-governmental organizations in this area; the Ministry of Justice has a small division that deals with Christian courts, conversion between Christian denominations, and authorization of land deals involving Christian bodies. The distribution of responsibilities among government bodies was evident during negotiations between Israel and the Vatican over an economic agreement, the status of holy places, and the question of exemption from national and municipal taxes, all of which involved four ministries (Foreign Affairs, Justice, Interior, and Finance). The Ministry of Tourism encourages Christian tourism and pilgrimage, the police handle clashes in the holy places, the Civil Administration and the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories manage the affairs of Christian communities and holy places in the West Bank, and the General Security Services participate in the authorization of permits for clergy seeking to enter Israel. The Mayor of Jerusalem’s Advisor for Community Affairs deals mainly with affairs of the Christian communities, but at times he too has difficulties in pursuing the issue through municipal and governmental bureaucratic complexities.

Despite the importance of the Christian issue for Israel's foreign relations and its image in the world as well as its relations with the local Arab minority, historically none of Israel's governments has strategically and systematically considered how to address this sensitive and neglected issue. The topic makes headlines only when special events take place, such as clashes at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, problems in the granting of permits, or a pending a Papal visit. Church leaders complain that they have no fixed government address where they can conduct a steady, continuous dialogue regarding their problems and hardships. According to them, even when the officials in charge demonstrate good will, they lack significant influence within the decision-making mechanisms and cannot fulfill their promises, thus their demands and requests for basic needs remain unmet. The lack of clarity in division of responsibilities among various entities results in many issues "falling between the cracks." Bureaucratic and legal obstacles often derail any initiative or action on behalf of the local churches and Christian communities, for fear of setting a precedent that would necessitate such action on behalf of Muslim and Jewish bodies as well.

Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee, submitted a proposal to Minister Yitzhak Herzog in late 2004, suggesting that a special unit be created within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), or that a special minister be appointed therein, to coordinate management of Christian issues. Matters relating to the local communities and church leaders, including permits for clergy, border-inspection issues, and hosting Christian visitors, would be transferred to and coordinated by this unit, which would also handle relations with Christian communities throughout the world. According to Rabbi Rosen, such an appointment would send a message to the local communities and the entire Christian world that the government of Israel approaches these relations with the seriousness they merit. No action was taken, however, and at this time the possibility of this proposal being implemented appears slim in light of the decision that the PMO will not have any policy-making branches or units.

## **D. Recommendations for Israeli Policy towards Church Institutions and Christian Communities in East Jerusalem**

What, then, are the options available for advancing this issue within the Israeli government and making it a higher priority on the overburdened agenda of Israeli society? We outline here a series of recommendations for policy guidelines and measures that Israel can adopt in relation to the church institutions in Jerusalem and to the Christian Arab communities in northern Israel.

- (1) Bolster the Christian Communities Department in the Ministry of Interior with trained, professional, highly qualified personnel who are familiar with the Christian world and the Christian churches and communities in Israel. It is recommended that the Department operate within three areas, that is, that it be organized as three divisions: one to handle the local problems of churches in Israel; another to address issues related to the holy places and the status quo; and the third division to manage Israel's relations with the external Christian world (hosting prominent Christian visitors, organizing interreligious dialogue meetings, and the like). The last division could operate under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry.
- (2) The Ministry of Interior should adopt a comprehensive approach to the process of granting permits for Christian clergy and organizations on the basis of a long-range perspective addressing Israel's relations with the Christian world, rather than solely on the basis of short-term considerations of granting entry and visitation permits to "foreigners" and security considerations. "Family unification" should be permitted in cases of marriage between Christian residents of East Jerusalem or citizens of Israel, on the one hand, and residents of the territories beyond the Green Line or in Jordan, on the other, because the future of Christian communities – now facing a serious demographic crisis – depends on finding such a solution to this issue.
- (3) The Foreign Ministry department that handles relations and dialogue with the Christian world should be strengthened and expanded, and its mandate should be broadened to include setting goals and coordinating objectives with Israeli and Jewish organizations that work on these issues, as well as

the collective struggle by Israel and Christian entities (such as the Vatican) against anti-Semitism and the delegitimization of Israel.

- (4) Coordination should be improved among the various government ministries (Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice), the Israel Police and the Municipality of Jerusalem in the handling of Christian issues. A permanent entity should be established for planning and coordination, and the appointment, within the PMO, of a minister or deputy minister who would promote this matter should be considered.
- (5) It is proposed that educational courses, seminars, and study days of study be provided for those who work on this topic for all levels of decision makers, officials, clerks, and shapers of public opinion. An in-depth study of the complex issues linked to the Christian presence in Israel is an essential precondition for informed decision making and wise management of the issue.
- (6) Negotiations with the Holy See should be concluded and agreements signed that would cement the standing of the Catholic Church (and, following that, the other churches) legally and economically within Israel, including resolution of national and municipal tax payments. The agreements should then be approved by the government and Knesset.
- (7) The standing of the Christian courts should be resolved through the Ministry of Justice in cooperation with church leaders and community representatives.
- (8) We recommend resolution of the planning and building issues relating to lands belonging to the churches in Jerusalem generally and in the city's Historic Basin specifically, and establishing a fixed address within the Municipality of Jerusalem for handling these matters. The historical activities of the churches and the European powers behind them – primarily from the middle of the 19th century until World War I – turned these churches into a prime real estate asset comprising (according to a study by Israel Kimhi of the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies) lands totaling approximately 5,000 dunam (500 hectares). These territories are concentrated in important and central parts of the city such as the Old City, the surrounding Historic

Basin , the Mount of Olives, Liberty Bell Park, Bloomfield Garden (adjacent to the Yemin Moshe neighborhood), the area around Keren HaYesod Street and the neighborhood of Talbiya, the Valley of the Cross and its environs (including part of the lot on which the Knesset stands), the public garden surrounding the San Simon Monastery, the area of Mar Elias Monastery adjacent to the Har Homa neighborhood, and others. This situation makes the churches a most significant factor in all matters relating to the development of the city in general and of the Historic Basin in particular. We believe that the churches and the entities working on their behalf should be permitted to build neighborhoods for Christian Arab families on lands they own in order to strengthen local Christian communities. Construction of institutions for the Christian communities should be encouraged and steps should be taken to strengthen connections and relations between Jerusalem and the Christian world.

- (9) Measures should be adopted to ensure the physical safety of Jerusalem's church clergy, who have at times suffered harassment and violence, particularly near the Jewish Quarter in the Old City and the ultra-orthodox neighborhoods in the area around Mea Shearim. Such measures include increased police vigilance, security cameras, and educational and informational activities, especially in the yeshivas located in these areas.
- (10) Church leaders should be treated with respect and made to feel that their standing in the Holy City is important and guaranteed. They should be consulted on all matters relating to development of the Old City, the Historic Basin, and areas important to Christianity (such as the Ein Kerem neighborhood) whenever the Municipality and Jerusalem Development Authority are involved. The custom of having the mayor visit church leaders on Christmas and Easter, as longtime Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek did in his day, should be consistently maintained. (Recently this practice was renewed by Mayor Nir Barkat.)
- (11) Israeli government officials should provide assistance in making arrangements and organizing activities for the various communities and churches at the holy places – foremost among them the Church of the Holy Sepulcher – especially during events with large crowds. They should also

assist in resolving problems such as those relating to the status quo. All of these issues require thorough, attentive care at the highest government level before they become urgent, rather than under the pressure of crisis.

- (12) The opportunities provided by important holiday ceremonies (Christmas, Holy Fire, and Easter) should be used to promote pilgrimage and cultural tourism to Jerusalem, and creative plans should be pursued to address problems of over-crowding and lack of accessibility to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Old City as a whole, for example by broadcasting the ceremonies onto screens located outside the walls of the Old City. There is widespread agreement among tourism experts that the potential of pilgrimage tourism and “cultural tourism” has not been fully actualized, and that much may be done to advance it. The local Christian communities and bodies that operate in Jerusalem are allies and vital participants in the development of this tourism.
- (13) It is worth considering the renewal of support for Christian community centers in Jerusalem. Assistance should be provided in reopening the museums affiliated with the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate and the Armenian Patriarchate. Plots of land should be allocated for cemeteries as required by the Christian communities, and if necessary, state-owned land should be allocated for this purpose.

These measures could contribute significantly to strengthening the status of Jerusalem. Historically, it may be said that Christianity was to a large extent the “loudspeaker” that broadcast the holiness of Jerusalem throughout the world and made it a “global city.” Jerusalem is the only city in the world that is sacred to all Christian denominations and organizations as well as to Judaism and Islam. The disappearance of Christian communities and churches from the panorama of the city and surrounding metropolis would strike a severe blow to the charm of the city and to its special standing, which is unparalleled anywhere in the world.

## **E. Setting Policy Regarding the Christian Arab Community in Israel**

The complex and difficult situation of Christian Arabs in Israel received attention for the first time in the National Security Council (NSC), and later in the Prime Minister's Office, in response to a request by then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in the summer of 2003. These developments took place following complaints by the prime minister of Norway and other foreign leaders regarding Israel's inconsiderate policy towards the Christian clergy and communities in Israel. The principal assumption guiding the discussions was that the Arab minority is not a single monolithic bloc and that it is necessary to assess whether the Christian Arab community is a group with defined wishes of its own, and to what extent it is separate from the Muslim majority. Another question was posed: Are the relatively extremist voices that can be heard from time to time among Christian Arab spokespeople regarding the State of Israel representative of the prevalent views within this community?

The perspective that took shape within the NSC National Security Council held that Christian Arabs face a difficult dilemma, caught between two threats: the Jewish state versus the growth of radical Islam within Muslim society (and, to a certain extent, competition with the Druze community as well). The working assumption was that this question has more than one answer because different sectors of Christian Arab society have different views regarding this existential question, and these views are undoubtedly affected by the ups and downs of relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel and by the state's treatment of the Arab minority generally. The attitude towards the state and the Jewish majority, as reflected in day-to-day life, must be distinguished from the realm of principles and ideology. Despite these reservations, however, a viewpoint emerged according to which a number of factors – the growing strength of fundamentalist Muslim forces and entities within Arab society in Israel, the rise of Hamas to power in the Gaza Strip, and the global confrontation between fundamentalist Islam and the Western Christian world – combine to increase the readiness among many Christian Arabs to integrate within the country while preserving their religious and national uniqueness. This readiness is estimated to be greater among Christian Arabs residing in Haifa and in villages with a Christian majority (Fassuta, Mi'ilya, Jish, and Eilabun).

On the basis of this analysis, we propose that cautious efforts be undertaken to provide assistance to the Christian Arab community in a number of ways, without creating tension with or estrangement from the Muslim majority. In fact, there are indications that the Israeli establishment is showing progress in this context in some fields, including the following:

- (A) An initiative to create an association for tourism in Galilee villages with a Christian majority – Fassuta, Mi'ilya, Jish, and Eilabun – with the participation of the Galilee Development Authority, the Ministry for Development of the Negev and the Galilee, and the Ministry of Tourism. This initiative is based on the concept of creating links between Christian tourism and local Christian communities. There seems to be great potential in this type of tourism, which is unique to the Christian Arab sector and therefore likely to draw only minor opposition from the Muslim majority. These Galilee villages are also likely to present an attractive destination for domestic tourism for Israelis seeking a cultural experience of interaction and dialogue.
- (B) Efforts aimed at accreditation by the Higher Education Council and the Israeli government for the Nazareth Academic Institute (formerly the Mar Elias College in I'billin) as the first Israeli academic institute in the Arab sector, founded through the initiative of members of the Christian Arab community. The efforts were successful, and after many delays the Council and the government approved the accreditation of the Institute in March, 2009. The Institute enjoys the support of Christian organizations abroad and operates as a multi-cultural institution, where Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Jews study and teach. In 2010 approval was granted to establish a communications program and a pre-baccalaureate preparatory program. The Institute's administrators are also planning programs for the study of tourism and for peace studies. Accreditation of the Institute, its improved financial situation, and its subsequent transformation into the university of the Galilee region are intended to strengthen the Christian Arab community and provide a model for coexistence for all sectors of the population.
- (C) Strengthening the Christian schools, which are the most successful of the schools within the Arab sector, as a key mechanism for preserving the

Christian identity of the community and enabling the progress of Muslim students from the middle and upper social classes as well, so that they can integrate into the Israeli society and economy.

- (D) Establishing social and cultural institutions to strengthen Christian Arab identity and heritage. Options that might be considered include founding community centers, a heritage center, a museum, and programs to foster young leadership.
- (E) Removing the obstacles to professional integration and progress that young Christian Arabs face in the private and public sectors. Their high level of education, multilingual abilities, familiarity with Western culture and its values, and advanced scientific and technological skills combine to make the Christian Arab community an important potential catalyst for growth for the entire northern region. The potential embodied within this community is reflected, for example, in the company Intel, which employs dozens of Christian Arab engineers and serves as a model multinational company that does not depend on the defense/security sector and therefore does not hesitate to employ Arabs. In northern Israel, Christian Arabs are also prominent in professions such as law, accounting, medicine, pharmacy, and engineering.

Describing the untapped economic potential embodied in the Christian Arab community is one of the most effective ways of persuading Israel's economic and political establishment of the need to integrate educated Christian Arabs (men and women) into the workforce. This objective coincides nicely with the general government objective of integrating Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews into Israeli society. Yet there is also a salient difference between these two groups: a substantial portion of the ultra-orthodox community has ideological and other barriers to joining the workforce, whereas motivation is high among educated Arabs (Christian and Muslim) to do so. In recent years we have witnessed unprecedented government efforts to encourage business and economic activity in the Arab sector, such as through the establishment of a joint government and private sector fund for investing in businesses within this community. Another idea that deserves consideration is to encourage young Christian Arab men and women to join the National Service (Sherut Leumi) program.

Proceeding cautiously along these and other lines, without alienating the Muslim population, could contribute significantly to improving the standing of the Christian Arab community in Israel and even transform it into a mechanism to assist in integrating the general Arab population into the Israeli society and economy. The improvements sought also have positive implications for the future of the State of Israel and its relations with the Christian world and the Arab minority in Israel, whereas continued exclusion of the Christian Arab community from society and the economy will thwart realization of these aims.

The book lays out the challenges that Israeli society will face with respect to Christian issues over the coming decade in various areas: the relationship with church leaders in Jerusalem and the treatment of holy places; the conditions of Christian communities in East Jerusalem and their relations with communities in Ramallah and Bethlehem; the Christian Arab communities with Israeli citizenship; the non-Arab Christian communities (primarily from the former Soviet Union) that who identify with the majority Jewish society; migrant labor communities, refugees, and asylum seekers; and the place of Christianity and its symbols in the Jewish state. All these issues merit more serious and in-depth attention than they have received thus far from the government, policy makers, and shapers of public opinion in Israel. We reiterate the observation that residual historical memories, hostility, ignorance, and the overloaded agenda of Israeli society have tended to relegate the Christian issue to the bottom of the national priority list, despite its immense importance. The remarks of Rabbi Rosen, during the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops (Rome, October 2010), nicely summarize the challenges we have outlined:

Indeed, [it is a] Jewish responsibility to ensure that Christian communities flourish in our midst, respecting the very fact that the Holy Land is the land of Christianity's birth and holy places .... Yet even beyond our particular relationship, Christians as a minority in both Jewish and Muslim contexts play a very special role for our societies at large. The situation of minorities is always a profound reflection of the social and moral condition of a society as a whole. The wellbeing of Christian communities in the Middle East is nothing less than a kind of barometer of the moral condition of our countries. The degree to which Christians enjoy civil and religious rights and liberties testifies to the health or infirmity of the respective societies in the Middle East.