

## **Christian/Jewish Relations in Israel**

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The makeup of the Christian presence in Israel has changed in recent decades due both to the presence of a significant minority of Christians among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the tens of thousands of Christian foreign workers in the country. Nevertheless, the historic Christian presence in the Holy Land is Arab and currently numbers a little more than 130,000 of the approximately 1.8 million Arab Israeli citizens.

Christian Arab Israelis are a particularly successful religious minority in many respects. Their socio-economic and educational standards are well above average; their schools regularly produce some of the highest grades in annual matriculation examinations; many of them have been politically prominent; and they have been able to derive much benefit from the democratic system of which they are an integral part.

However despite the small size of the State of Israel, very often people choose to live in voluntary segregation among like-minded communities of shared values and lifestyle. Both villages and city neighborhoods often reflect the common origins and religious orientations and behavior (or lack thereof) of their residents.

Furthermore, the fact that the national educational system designates schools to serve specific neighborhoods, means that as a rule children attend schools where pupils are of similar background and religious (or irreligious) identity.

Often it is only when being enlisted into the army that young people encounter those of significantly different backgrounds. But as the vast majority of Arabs do not serve in the IDF, most Israelis do not have the opportunity as a matter of course for any kind of interreligious encounters. .

Thus even though the State of Israel grants official recognition to ten Christian denominations, guarantees their religious freedom, and has ministerial departments to care for their needs and interests; most Israeli Jews have never met an Israeli Christian.

And even when Jewish Israelis travel abroad, they tend to meet non-Jews as such - not as modern Christians. Accordingly the perception of Christians among many if not most Israeli Jews are still influenced by negative historical memories and there has been a lack of awareness of the significant changes in the Christian world as a whole in relation to Jews and Judaism.

This has begun to change in the recent decades for a number of reasons, not least of all due to the demographic factors already mentioned. One of the most notable events in this regard was the visit of the late Pope John Paul II in the year 2000 following the establishment of full bilateral relations between Israel, and the Holy See six years earlier. For Israelis to see the Pope at Yad VaShem (the Holocaust memorial centre) in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering, and to see him at the Kotel (the Western Wall), showing respect for Jewish tradition and placing there the text that he had composed for a liturgy of forgiveness that he had held two weeks earlier here at St. Peter's, asking Divine forgiveness for sins committed against the Jews down the ages, had a profound impact.

In addition, the visit led to the remarkable new avenue for dialogue and understanding in the form of the bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, and a similar bilateral commission was subsequently also established with the Anglican Church.

John Paul II's two successors followed in his footsteps, visiting the Holy land and reaffirming their commitment to advancing Jewish-Christian relations. In addition an increased Evangelical Christian interest in the life of the State of Israel, even though not without some problematic theological and political aspects, has nevertheless made Israeli Jews more aware of positive Christian engagement with the Jewish People.

However the challenge, neglected by the State, of overcoming the overwhelming ignorance within Israeli society about Christianity generally and about the local Christian communities in particular, has been taken up by many NGOs. There are more than two hundred Israeli organizations promoting Arab-Jewish understanding and cooperation generally, and there are dozens of bodies promoting interreligious encounter, dialogue and studies. The Christian presence in the interfaith arena in particular has been very significant. This has substantially been due to the presence of Christian institutions and their clergy, scholars, international representatives of churches and so on, who contribute disproportionately to these efforts especially in the field of scholarship.

Jewish initiatives in Israel to advance relations with Christianity range from small scholarly gatherings such as the Jerusalem Rainbow Group (the pioneer of Jewish-Christian encounter in Israel) to the work of the Rossing Center (formerly the Jerusalem Centre for Jewish Christian Relations) founded by the late Daniel Rossing who served for many years as the Director of the Department for Christian Communities in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This organization set up to advance relations in particular with the indigenous Arab Christian communities, is led today by Dr. Sarah Bernstein and reaches many thousands through schools and other frameworks across the country advancing not only Jewish-Christian relations but also understanding and engagement across the multi-religious spectrum in Israel.

The political context inevitably impacts profoundly on the Christian communities. Those in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are part and parcel of a Palestinian society struggling for its own self-determination in which Israel is seen as an opponent. But Christians in Israel are citizens of the country who have an interest in being accepted and understood by the Jewish polity as a whole. Naturally this leads to very different political perspectives. But regardless of whether in Palestinian or Israeli society, the engagement with Christians offers important opportunities for both Muslim and Jewish societies to gain a greater appreciation of the religious diversity and history of the land as a whole..

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