

# THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE FUTURE OF JERUSALEM

*The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, was interviewed by **Palestine-Israel Journal** intern/journalist Anna Koulouris.*

Politically speaking, Jerusalem is often discussed in terms of only two sides Israeli and Palestinian. This fact does not imply denying or ignoring the special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which insisted in its peace agreement with Israel on being a major partner when the status of Jerusalem is decided between Israel and the Palestinians. The religious significance of Jerusalem is kept a separate matter it is simply a city of the utmost importance for the three Abrahamic faiths. The Greek Orthodox Christians, or Rum Orthodox as they are historically called, have had a history in Jerusalem for more than 2,000 years. As the inheritor of tradition, property and leadership, the Greek Orthodox Church aspires to play a significant role in the political future of this city. The jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which includes more than 150,000 Christians, stretches across Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), including Jerusalem, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. By default, the patriarch takes on a role as a political leader whose voice is considered integral in many local and international matters. As a local institution, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Israeli government rely on cooperation in order to carry out many of their respective functions. At the same time, any newly elected Greek Orthodox patriarch has to seek the approval of his nomination by the three parties: Jordan, Israel and Palestine. Members of the synods should have Jordanian citizenship. The primary function of the patriarchate is to preserve and protect the holiest sites in Christendom, as it has done since the birth of Christianity.

The 141<sup>st</sup> Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, discusses the Greek Orthodox Church's current and future role in Jerusalem and the peace process, responds to criticisms and shares personal opinions.

**Palestine-Israel *Journal*: What is the significance of the Greek Orthodox Church for Jerusalem?**

Patriarch Theophilos III: The role of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the church is extremely important for the current and future status of Jerusalem. Its history cannot be dissociated from the political and cultural-religious history of Jerusalem. It has an unbreakable historical presence for 2,000 years and is the only religious institution that has been here throughout the ages. Its purpose and mission continues to be crystal clear and purely religious and spiritual; it does not promote any other interests. Today, if Jerusalem enjoys a certain status and cultural and religious character, it is due to the presence of the patriarchate, which is the inheritor of the spiritual heritage, but also the natural heritage. By natural heritage I mean churches, basilicas, places of worship, holy places that have been handed over to the patriarchate by the Byzantines who left Palestine in the 7<sup>th</sup> century with the coming of Omar ibn al-Khattab. It was at this time that the Patriarch of Jerusalem became both the spiritual and ethnic leader of the Greek Orthodox community.

**Speaking of heritage, there have been accusations by some local Arab Orthodox residents that the Greeks have maintained cultural dominance and that Arabs have not been promoted to certain official positions in the church to the same degree as the Greeks have. Is this true?**

There is a bigger question here. The name of the patriarchate and all Eastern Orthodox Christians locally here is Rum. This is how they are recognized and identified by the Muslim Arabs

and Palestinians, in general. It is a matter of cultural identity or identity crisis that many people have difficulties understanding the meaning of Rum. The West has also brought them confusion about their identity, which could be remedied with education and [an] understanding [of] history. And you have to refer back to your roots. You cannot disregard the Byzantine presence that was here. The stones are talking everything is talking. I have prepared an academic study which gives a very thorough and complete analysis of the meaning of Rum and what it means to be a member of that church.

**Although the Greek Orthodox Church has had a presence in Jerusalem since its existence, looking forward, there is a political agenda on the part of Israel. No one can deny they would like to gain property that the patriarchate owns, especially in the Jaffa Gate area. Has this put pressure on the church?**

You have touched upon a very delicate issue, the core of the importance and significance of the patriarchate's presence and role concerning Jerusalem and the greater area. From the religious point of view, many of the holy places under the charge of the patriarchate have remained accessible to all pilgrims and visitors without any discrimination whatsoever. It is due to the presence of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulcher. What has been acknowledged by everybody locally, regionally and internationally is that if it were not for the presence of the patriarchate here, most of the holy places would have been destroyed, or at the end of the day, turned into museums or archeological sites and tourist attractions. But so far, the holy places have been maintained as places of blessedness and worship.

In terms of culture and even politics, the patriarchate is very important, first of all because it gives legitimacy to the historical claims that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the PA have over the holy places because they both have claims from the Muslim Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab, when the Muslims

took over the city of Jerusalem from the then-Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronius, and it is well known that they made a peace covenant known as the Covenant of Omar. This fundamental agreement has been the basis of all the legal transactions or legal agreements that have taken place so far between the patriarchate and the states and their respective authorities. The other thing is that the patriarchate has been the inheritor of the natural heritage, that is to say, churches, monasteries and other properties, which later were augmented. This is what makes the patriarchate important for the natural, the physical and the demographic [aspects] of Jerusalem. The patriarchate continues to hold properties within and around the Old City within politically strategic places.

**Is any of this, the strength of the patriarchate, a source of tension with the Israeli government today?**

Jerusalem is [at] the heart of the political developments here, so it is natural that the patriarchate is part and parcel of the political conflict and interests. But the mission of the patriarchate remains spiritual and religious. Unlike the other Christian churches here and they do have a lot of properties as well the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is the only church institution that is independent, autonomous and autocephalous. This means the properties of the patriarchate are properties of the country here, the land here they belong here.

As for the properties belonging to the other churches, for example, those belonging to the Roman Catholic Church or to the Russian Church, these are state properties. They do not belong here to the locality, but to the respective states. Some time ago, if you visited Notre Dame you could see written [there] Vatican Property. The same happened recently, the Russians asked for some properties to be restored and returned to their proper owners. But who is dealing with the state about these properties, or with the Palestinian Authority? It is the state, not the church.

The other thing is that all the other churches have their point of reference far away from Jerusalem. The appointments of the leaders of the other Christian churches and institutions are coming from abroad, from outside not from within. So you understand the importance of the patriarchate; it is a local institution.

**How is the relationship now between Jordan, Palestine and Israel, the states within the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem?**

The relationship today is excellent. After the crisis that the patriarchate passed through, and [when] I assumed my responsibilities as the head of the church here, of course there were all sorts of problems, difficulties and misunderstandings. But eventually everybody realized that my task is to give what is due unto God and what is due unto Caesar.

**How much of a role does the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate play in speaking about Palestinian rights, especially with its close proximity to areas like Silwan? Does the church feel a responsibility to take a political stance on the issue?**

We try not to interfere or turn ourselves into politicians, but at the same time this does not mean that we do not have compassion for the suffering and the affliction through which the people are passing here. And this is why the churches here have established a kind of council to discuss issues of common concern. We are addressing issues like the recent shooting in Silwan and others. Our purpose is to try, from our position, to contribute to mutual respect and understanding and to peaceful coexistence and symbiosis. This is the duty of the church. This is why we as churches have officially and repeatedly made statements and expressed our position over the status of Jerusalem.

Our position on Jerusalem is that we want it to be an open

city, to be accessible to everybody, and that Jerusalem has enough space to accommodate all religious communities. We say it is enough for us to be allowed to visit and venerate the places that are commonly holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Even if we do not have claims over the site itself, we have claims to the holiness and sanctity of the place. The Temple Mount is an example. Another example is King David's Tomb on Mount Zion. When we have our holy day of Pentecost, which we celebrate in our monastery and at the school on Mount Zion, after the service we go in our liturgical vestments in a procession to King David's Tomb, which is a synagogue. There we go for worship, to say our prayers and leave. This is what we want. This is our understanding of the holy places. This is why I have said Jerusalem has enough space to accommodate everybody.

Politically speaking, everybody has claims over Jerusalem and everybody wants Jerusalem to be his or her own capital. But from the religious point of view, Jerusalem is the capital of God. And my personal position is that Jerusalem breathes with three lungs: a Christian lung, a Jewish lung and an Islamic lung. And those lungs, they breathe harmoniously. This is how we see the future of Jerusalem.

**What is your opinion about the ongoing negotiations of a taxation agreement between the Israeli government and the Vatican, which could mean that church institutions would have to pay income, property and municipal taxes? Does this Orthodox Church feel sidelined knowing that if an agreement is reached, it will set a precedent for the other churches?**

The situation with the Vatican negotiations is far more complex. The Greek Orthodox Church is not sidelined because the legal status of the patriarchate differs from the Vatican. It is the only church institution with Jordanian law. The patriarchate is a local institution. The Vatican is a spiritual and political entity, so its representatives cannot speak on behalf of the local Christians here.

**There are many videos online of infighting that takes place between the Greeks and Armenians in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. They seem shameful, and it is hard to understand how such clashes occur in holy places. How would you explain the dynamic here to an observer?**

I understand your question, but people try to limit those religious conflicts and fights to certain events that have taken place between Franciscans, between Greeks and Armenians, Armenians and Syrians, Copts and Ethiopians, and so on. But, in fact, we must think a bit deeper and ask ourselves what the entire conflict is about between Palestinian Muslims and Jewish Israelis. Is it not about religion? It is about religion. What is the importance of Jerusalem, politically speaking? Is Jerusalem important for military or strategic purposes? It is purely religious, nothing else. The conflict here is religious. When you see clashes in Jerusalem, especially over the Temple Mount and al-Haram al-Sharif, what is it all about? Is it not about religious areas? So they focus on a particular point in the Holy Sepulcher; that makes sense; it is natural. But they cannot focus on the broader picture of what is going on here in the Holy Land.

Now, there is another thing that we should not forget; we have to take into consideration our human predicament. Actually, all the fights and clashes in the past were in the name of God. The Crusades, what were they all about? Were they not in the name of God? And there are so many others. Today, it is not called in the name of God, but in this game, in one way or another, religion is involved.

**In the World Council of Churches, how does the Greek Orthodox Church view its need to be there or to be a participant?**

The Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem were among the pioneers, the founders of the World Council of Churches. It was established at the initiative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and then all the

other churches followed. The council plays an important role in bringing together all the Christian denominations and has done great work because all sorts of prejudices have been dissipated.

The problem is this: During its inception years, the council focused on the unity of the Christian churches and denominations, but then the focus was diverted from a theological discussion to social matters because of the influence of the Protestant churches. Later on, in many cases, it got involved in political matters. Today, the council still plays an important role, but not as prominent as in the past because of many political changes and developments.

Still, the Orthodox Church is committed to the mission of the World Council of Churches. This is why we participate. I myself was the first representative of the patriarchate to become a member of the central committee of the council. Now we have our current representative, and we have recently welcomed the new secretary-general of the World Council of Churches. We are trying to contribute as much as possible because today this is important, especially for our religion. It can help in the peace process and reconciliation, and to bring peace and justice as well.

**After the contact you had with the Greek prime minister recently when he visited Israel, what does the patriarchate expect from the Greek government? Do you believe Mr. George Papandreou will help to better relations in the area? Will you and he act as middlemen in political matters here?**

The visit of Mr. Papandreou was really very important because he made it clear that his mission is to strengthen this initiative of the peace process. It is a well-known fact that he enjoys respect from both the Israeli and the Palestinian leadership. It is known that his father was a great supporter of the Palestinians during the time of President Yasser Arafat. And to come here to the patriarchate, it is another



sign that everybody realizes the importance of the patriarchate, not only in the religious but also in the political sphere. Since the conflict, as I said, is religious, all those leaders are slowly realizing that without the assistance or advice of the religious leadership, not only Christian but also Muslim and Jewish, they cannot succeed in their efforts to bring peace and reconciliation to the area.

**Your position is one of great importance and very demanding, yet you seem to have a low profile and live simply. From where do you draw strength on a daily basis?**

It is a very hard question. I think all the strength is from above; it is from the church, from prayer. That is it.

**What kind of advice would you give to people in the world today who may be struggling with the current economic state of affairs and other challenges that modernity and globalization present?**

To people I would say that the exit and refuge from this world's complexities is faith in God.

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