

THE HOLY PLACES: RUSSIAN CHURCH RENEWS ITS CLAIM

By Walter Zander

For centuries the Christian Holy Places of Jerusalem have been the source of religious conflict and international political intrigue. Against this background Dr Zander whose book on 'Israel and the Holy Places of Christendom' will shortly be published by Weidenfeld & Nicholson, discusses the latest and strangest episode in this complex story.

When on June 7, 1967, the Israeli Army entered Old Jerusalem and the town of Bethlehem, a unique situation was created. The holiest of the Christian Holy Places, the sites associated with the birth and the death of Christ, the Basilica of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, had come under Jewish control.

Since the days of Pontius Pilate Palestine had seen a varied succession of rulers: Rome and Byzantium, Persia and the Caliphs of Baghdad, the Latin Kingdom of the Crusaders, Egyptian Mamelukes, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; a long and colourful procession. But never in all these centuries had power over the country rested with the Jews.

The Church since early days had seen in Israel's dispersion a religious meaning. The Synagogue had been represented in Medieval Art defeated, with a broken spear and blindfolded, whilst the Church appeared triumphant in possession of the Truth. Now authority over the Christian sanctuaries was in the hands of the Jewish State. The Jews on the other hand who always had refrained from contact with Christianity, found themselves faced with the unprecedented and unexpected task of being Protectors of the Holy Grave. Such changes call for a new assessment of the situation and possibly of the whole relationship between Christians and Jews.

In addition, the Christian positions around the Holy Places themselves are in a state of transformation. All Christian communities are united in their attachment to the sanctuaries, their "*most precious souvenirs*". But they are divided on dogmatic and other grounds; and the Holy Places are tragically involved in the conflict. They have, in fact, almost become a symbol of the schism, with their unco-ordinated services, held simultaneously in different key, rhythm and style, in discord, bearing witness, as it were, in the most sacred places to the division of Christendom.

The origin of the division between Eastern and Western Christendom is commonly traced to the year 1054, when Cardinal Humbert, Ambassador of Pope Leo IX, placed on the altar of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, a Bull of

excommunication of Patriarch Michael Cerelarius, and the latter in turn condemned the Ambassador and his associates. Since that time the division has affected all Christian relationships. It played an important part in the Crusades which aimed not only at the liberation of the Holy Grave from the Infidels, but also at the reunification of the Church under Rome. Pope Gregory VII had made his support of the Byzantine Emperor dependent upon the return of the Eastern Church to Roman authority.

Later, when the First Crusades had led to the conquest of Jerusalem and the establishment of the Latin Kingdom, the Greek Patriarchs who throughout the ages had presided over the Church in Jerusalem were replaced by Latins; and only after Jerusalem had fallen to Saladin, in 1187, were the Orthodox reinstated. The conflict between the Churches reached its climax when, in 1204, the army of the Fourth Crusade instead of moving against Jerusalem - attacked and sacked with utmost cruelty the Christian city of Byzantium with its Hagia Sophia, the cathedral of the Divine Wisdom.

For centuries the control of the sanctuaries has been divided between the Latins and the Eastern Churches. The former received support from the West, especially France, while the latter relied essentially on the indigenous Christian communities, but in addition, since the 18th century, enjoyed the protection of Czarist Russia. Political interests of the protectors mingled with the religious issues, and the position of pre-eminence in the sanctuaries changed frequently according to power and influence.

In 1740, France secured from Turkey a capitulation - as a reward for the help she had given her against Christian Austria and Russia - in which pre-eminence was promised to the Catholics. But local opposition proved too strong, and seventeen years later, these rights were already severely curtailed. The new state of affairs was formally ratified by the Turks in 1757, and confirmed in a Firman of 1852. It survived the Crimean war, It was internationally recognized in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, as the status quo, and up to the present day determines "*the existing rights and customs*".

Catholic writers, from time to time, have proclaimed that they consider the changes of 1757 as usurpations, and they demand a return to the state of 1740,¹ while the representatives of the Eastern Churches object to any change.² Both parties put their claims before the Peace Conference at Versailles, but no change took place. The *status quo* of 1757 was integrated into the Mandate, maintained afterwards by Jordan. and is in force today.

Throughout the centuries of conflict about the respective rights of the Christian communities in the Holy Places, the schism of the Churches itself was taken for granted, as if it were a permanent, unshakable foundation. But during the last ten years great changes have taken place. Today the schism itself has been challenged.

In January 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention of calling an Ecumenical Council to promote the restoration of unity among all Christians, and although the Council, of course, did not approach questions of dogma, it revealed a profound change of heart among the Council members regarding reunion. Up till then reunion had been conceived by Catholics as a *return* of the separated communities to Rome. Now it was visualized as a movement by all towards the *common* aim. Moreover the Council in its Decree on Ecumenism³ admitted that in the past “*at times men of both sides were to blame*”, and called for study and ecumenical dialogue “*on an equal footing*”, in a spirit of charity.

It was during the Council in January 1964, that Pope Paul VI who by then had succeeded to the Papal See, made his historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the first Pope in the history of Christendom to visit the Christian sanctuaries. In addition his pilgrimage re-established after centuries of separation the first personal contacts between Rome and the Orthodox Churches on the highest possible level.

In a “*sacred encounter*” the Pope met three of the Eastern Patriarchs, including the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagros I who had come from Constantinople. The words spoken on this occasion indicate a new era in the history of Christendom.

“*Very Holy Pope*” the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem addressed the distinguished pilgrim: “*Zion, the venerable mother of the Churches joyfully salutes your happy arrival.*” “*An ancient Christian tradition*”, said the Pope, “*likes to see the ‘centre of the world’ in the place where the Cross was erected, and it was in this place that we pilgrims from Rome and Constantinople could meet and unite in common prayer.*”

“*Since centuries*”, Athenagros re-plied to the Pope, “*the Christian world lived in the night of separation. Their eyes became tired by staring into the darkness. May this meeting be the dawn of a bright and blessed day.*”

Following this meeting, a remarkable act of charity, imagination and forgiveness was performed jointly by Rome and Constantinople. In two ceremonies, held simultaneously on December 7, 1965, in St. Peter’s in Rome and in the Patriarchal Church of Istanbul, during a solemn liturgy, a joint declaration was read in which Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagros I regretted the deplorable events of 1054, the offensive words, the reproaches without foundations, and removed from the memory of the Church

the sentences of excommunication, expressing the hope that the differences between the two Churches would be overcome by an effective will to reach understanding.

While Rome and Constantinople started along the long road towards reunion, the Russian Church sped her return to the Middle East. Originally the leadership of Orthodoxy had been in the hands of the Patriarch of Byzantium. But after it fell to the Turks in 1433, Russia began to feel that the responsibility of leading and defending the Orthodox had fallen upon her.

Early in the 16th century the monk Philothei proclaimed Moscow’s sacred role as the *Third Rome* which “*shines brighter than the sun over the Universe and which stands fast*”. During the following centuries there developed among the Russian people a mystical sense of a messianic mission which reached its culmination in the Panslavic Movement of the 19th century.

“*Sooner or later*”, wrote Dostoevski, in 1877, “*Constantinople must be ours. It is not only the famous harbour, not alone the way to the seas and oceans, not even the unification and the awakening of the Slav peoples ... our task lies deeper, infinitely deeper. We Russians are indispensable for Christendom in its entirety and for the future of Orthodoxy on Earth.*” “*This terrible Eastern Question contains not only the whole of our destiny; it contains all of our tasks, above all our only way into the fullness of world history, and there lies at the same time our ultimate conflict and our ultimate reunion with Europe. Sooner or later Constantinople must needs be ours even if we have to wait until the next century.*”⁴

It was natural that such visions of Russian leadership led to tensions with the Greeks who formed the clergy of the Orthodox Churches in the Middle East and especially in Palestine.

In 1844, the Russian Archimandrite Ouspenski who had been sent to investigate the situation, reported to the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg that the Orthodox Church in Jerusalem could only be saved by Russian intervention. Ouspenski was followed by a strong Russian Church Mission whose activities in due course led to complaints by the Greek Orthodox authorities in Jerusalem. There was much rivalry between the parties during which the Russians consistently supported the Arab laity against the Greek clergy.

Throughout the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Russia vastly expanded her interests in Palestine. With great munificence she established churches, monasteries, convents, hospitals and schools, and there was a steady stream of Russian pilgrims who far out-numbered the pilgrims from other countries.

“Every year”, wrote Laurence Oliphant,⁵ in 1880, “four thousand Russian pilgrims, composed largely of discharged soldiers make painful and laborious journeys to visit the sacred shrines, and it is impossible not to be struck by the air of fanatical superstition which characterises them.”

Oliphant felt that the Russian people might be fascinated by a religious war to conquer the Holy Places, and he even believed that the position of the Russian Compound in Jerusalem had been chosen with this contingency in mind. *“It commands the whole town and is thought by many to be in a position designedly of military strength.”*

Another writer, Stephen Graham,⁶ described the religious intensity of the Russian pilgrims *“for whom all serious occupations of their life are ended when they have been in Jerusalem”*.

Thus Russia considered herself as the Protectress of all Orthodox Christians in the East, and Dostoevski even called her the Mother of the Orthodox, although canonically Moscow is the *Daughter* of Byzantium.

The revolution of 1917 brought Russian expansion and munificence and the stream of Russian pilgrims to the Holy Grave to an end—at least for the time being. Another tomb was erected in Red Square in Moscow which is visited annually by millions, and which in the few years of its existence has probably been seen by more visitors than the Holy Sepulchre ever had.

For nearly 30 years Russian interest in the religious sites of Palestine remained dormant. But the Second World War changed the situation. The Russian Church which had persevered under most difficult conditions, became a powerful factor in the defence of the country. Already during the war Stalin had allowed the election of a Patriarch of Moscow, the first to take place since Peter the Great. In 1945, the newly elected Patriarch visited the Middle East. While in Jerusalem, which at that time was still under British rule, he tried to lead the White Russian émigrés and their monasteries and convents back to the Church of Moscow, but was not successful. When in 1948, Palestine was divided, most of the Russian monasteries and convents came under Jordanian rule. The Russian Church Mission and Cathedral, however, were in Israel. They were taken over by the Moscow Patriarchate, and it soon became customary for the Soviet Diplomatic Mission in Israel and for the Soviet Ambassador himself to attend services in the Russian Cathedral, and to take part in the subsequent receptions.

The Soviet Consulate in Tel Aviv established a special Department for Ecclesiastical Affairs, and efforts were made to build new Russian churches in Israel. According to canonical rules, this requires the permission of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Jerusalem, and such permissions were

not easily forthcoming. In fact, voices were raised in Greek circles against the rise of Russian influence, and reversely, among Slavonic Churches it was suggested to transfer the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Constantinople to Moscow.

In 1952, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, at Moscow's request, broke off ecclesiastical relations with the dissident communities of the White Russian émigrés. In 1960, the Patriarch of Moscow again visited the Middle East. He did not enter Israel this time, but bestowed special privileges on the Russian Church Mission in Jerusalem.

Three years later, a newly built Russian chapel on the shores of Lake Tiberias was dedicated: and in 1966, Metropolitan Nikodeme, the President of the Department for External Ecclesiastical Affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate who himself had been Head of the Russian Church Mission in Jerusalem some years earlier, visited Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims from Mount Athos. He declared that *“large numbers of Russian Orthodox would like to see the Holy Land”* and expressed the hope that *“the movement of such pilgrims in future would considerably increase”*.

These were the developments within the Christian world around the Holy Places at the outbreak of the fighting on June 5, 1967.

Two days later, on June 7th, General Dayan announced the end of the fighting in Jerusalem. His broadcast contained the following message

“To our Christian and Moslem fellow citizens, we solemnly promise full religious freedom and rights. We came to Jerusalem not to possess ourselves of the Holy Places of others, nor to interfere with the members of other faiths .. ,”

On the same day, Prime Minister Eshkol assured the leaders of all religious communities that *“no harm of any kind will be allowed to befall the Holy Places”*, and added that it was his wish that arrangements for the Holy Places of every religion should be determined by a Council of its own dignitaries. On June 27th, the Knesset passed the Protection of Holy Places Law which provides long term prison punishment for any desecration of the sanctuaries.

The first test of Israel's administration of the Christian Holy Places came at Christmas 1967, and the eyes of the world were directed to *“the little town of Bethlehem”*. In Ottoman days the main problem had been the tension between Latins and Greeks. This was not the problem now. Two other issues had arisen.

The first was to prevent sightseers from disturbing the faithful. Accordingly Jews and other non-Christians were barred from Bethlehem by the Israel government. And for the

current Christmas similar arrangements are in hand. The second issue concerned security. Arab Christians had been warned in Jordan against accepting Israel's invitation to visit Bethlehem at Christmas. It was feared therefore that violence might break out, not for religious but for nationalist reasons. There was a great deployment of forces, military and police, and no untoward incident occurred.

On December 24th, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, accompanied by high church dignitaries set out from the Old City. According to custom he was received on his way at the Monastery of Mar Elias, and the Tomb of Rachel. His car, escorted by a detachment of Israeli Mounted Police was preceded by a platoon of Christian boy scouts on bicycles and followed by a motorcade of dignitaries who had welcomed him along the road.

At Manger Square the Patriarch was greeted by the Mayor of Bethlehem, and then led the procession into the Church of the Nativity. At night the Patriarch celebrated Pontifical Mass, assisted by local and visiting clergy. According to custom the catholic consuls of France, Belgium and Spain, in formal dress were seated in the first row on the right and there was an awareness of an historic event when General Uzi Narkiss took his seat of honour, as representative of the State of Israel: "*the first Jew since the days of Herod the Great to rule in Bethlehem*".⁸

Likewise the celebrations at Easter were performed without incident. On Good Friday the procession followed the Via Dolorosa, and the evening service in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was conducted by the Franciscan Custos. The congregation, holding lit candles in their hands, made a circuit inside the Basilica which ended at Calvary, the place where the Cross had stood.

A special place had been kept for the representative of the Israel Government but it was Passover night, and the holiness of the Passover made it impossible for him to attend the Christian Easter. It is Jewish tradition at the Passover night to keep a place empty at the table for the Prophet Elijah, and it might well be imagined that on that night the representative of the Government of Israel in his home kept a place at his table for the Prophet, whilst in Calvary the Franciscan Custos of the Holy Land kept a place for him at the service of the Deposition from the Cross.

Holy Week of the Orthodox Churches, too, was celebrated with customary dignity and beauty. The ceremonies concluded with a splendid colourful procession on Easter Sunday, headed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch who was flanked by the Greek Consul-General and the representative of Israel. The bells were tolling and the marchers were splashed with perfume and showered with rose petals by spectators on the roofs of the buildings lining the alleys.

While Israel endeavoured to administer the Christian Holy Places in the same way as her predecessors had done, Churches outside the country voiced their concern for the sanctuaries. The Vatican had advocated, 20 years ago the internationalization of Jerusalem, and these plans came to the forefront again.

Pope Paul VI, addressing the Secret Consistory on June 26, 1967, said that "*the Holy City of Jerusalem must remain for ever what she represents: the City of God, a free oasis of peace and prayer, with a statute of its own, internationally guaranteed*".

Later statements, such as the Papal Christmas address to the Cardinals concentrated more on the Holy Places themselves than on the City as a whole. The Moscow Patriarchate on the other hand opposed internationalization as a "colonialist conspiracy", and insisted on the re-establishment of the status quo which had existed before the fighting began. In addition, the Moscow Patriarchate made two moves. The first was a complaint to the President of Israel about violations of Russian Church property and molestation of Russian ecclesiastics in Israel.

From the correspondence, published in the Israeli Press and in the Monthly Bulletin of the Moscow Patriarchate, it appears that the complaint refers mainly to some minor misdeeds of adolescent offenders, committed in the years 1964 to 1866, before Israel occupied the Old City and before the promulgation of the Protection of Holy Places Law. It can be hoped, therefore, that no reason for complaint will be given again on this account.

The other move was a demand to hand over to the Moscow Patriarchate all assets of the White Russian Church which are now under Israel control.⁹ These assets comprise eight monasteries and convents, including the convent of Mary Magdalene in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Russian Tower on the Mount of Olives, which overlooks Jerusalem.

It can be assumed that the transfer of these monasteries and convents to Moscow would greatly increase the number of monks and nuns by new arrivals from the Soviet Union, and if, in addition, the stream of Russian pilgrims will be restored, as predicted by Metropolitan Nikodeme, the impact of the Russian Church on the Christian scene will be profound.

Meanwhile the status quo concerning all Christian Holy Places is meticulously maintained. In October 1968, Dr Elihu Lauterpacht suggested¹⁰ that Israel, in order to satisfy the international interest in the sanctuaries, issue a solemn Declaration on its policy towards them, and register the Declaration with the Secretariat of the United Nations.

He added that the Government of Israel had already been able to “*discuss matters in some detail with some of the principal interested parties ... on a basis she understands to be largely acceptable to those most immediately connected with the problem*”.

The essence of the proposed Declaration is a guarantee of freedom of access, of attendance and of worship, a guarantee which was issued in similar terms by Jordan and other Arab countries in November 1949. The suggestion also envisages supervision by a Commissioner of the Holy Places, to be appointed by the Secretary General, and proposals concerning a Council of the Holy Places and the settlement of disputes.

Whatever the details of such a formal Declaration may be, it can be expected that Israel will continue to protect the Christian sanctuaries, and guarantee freedom of access and worship, with care, dignity and respect. The developments in the Holy Places themselves will depend on the Christian communities. The events of the last few years have opened the way for practical cooperation between East and West.

The Decree on Ecumenism of the Vatican Council allows and encourages such cooperation. It even permits in certain special conditions joint prayer services for the sake of reunion. Pope Paul VI himself gave a memorable example when on December 4, 1965, he participated in an inter-faith prayer service for unity at the Basilica St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, assisting (not presiding) with Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox in a reading of scripture lessons.¹¹

What is possible in St. Paul’s Outside the Walls, should not be impossible in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; and if one day - instead of the discordant services which for centuries have symbolized the division of the Churches - a common prayer service for unity could be held at the Holy Sepulchre, it could become a symbol of reconciliation and hope, the impact of which will far transcend the borders of Christendom.

- 1 B. Collin, LE PROBLÈME JURIDIQUE DES LIEUX-SAINTS (Paris, 1956), p. 57.
- 2 N. Moschopoulos, LA TERRE SAINTE (Athènes, 1957), PP. 308/309.
- 3 THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II (London, 1967). PP. 341- 345. 349 and 353
- 4 F. Dostoevski, DIARY (March 1877 and also July 1876).
- 5 Laurence Oliphant, THE LAND OF GILEAD (London, 1880), p. 503.
- 6 Stephen Graham, WITH THE RUSSIAN PILGRIMS TO JERUSALEM (London, 1913), PP. 4/5
- 7 CHRISTIAN NEWS FROM ISRAEL (Government of Israel, Ministry of Religious Affairs, September 1966), p. 4.

8 The Observer, London, 24th December, 1967.

9 The Times, 5th October, 1968.

10 Elihu Lauterpacht, JERUSALEM AND THE HOLY PLACES, published by The Anglo-Israel Association (London, 1968).

11 THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II, loc. cit., p. 352.

