

THE ATTITUDE OF A CHRISTIAN ARAB  
TOWARDS ISRAEL

by

Father Elias Chacour\*

I have hesitated somewhat to state my views on so delicate and controversial a subject as "Christianity and Israel", and I am still hesitating, not so much out of fear of misunderstanding – or more correctly: refusal to understand – from the side of our Jewish friends and brothers, but because of the feeling that our "guests", the European Christians in Israel, have fallen in love with the myth of Israel – and not with the real State of Israel which is in need of solidarity, co-operation, appreciation and criticism. The Jewish people was of course always a victim of mythologisation by outsiders. Since a lot of false sentiments of extremism are involved here, the danger is great that these outsiders interpret in a wrong way our reality. They are not used to encountering opposition from a third world, and particularly not from a Christian Arab. They have always spoken – and continue to speak – in our name without our consent, without even knowing what our views are, but nevertheless we are always supposed to support their standpoint. It is difficult for them – if possible at all – to reconcile themselves to the fact that others claim to be Christians, and yet do not identify with their own – so-called Christian – past, and with their own present European or American way of thinking and logics, and with their own "Christian past" and – not always very shining – "Christian history".

There is an *Arab* way of behaviour in case of guilt, and in case of murder in particular. Even after the *Sulcha* (reconciliation) the people who are guilty have to remain at a distance for a time from their victims' relatives, for it is difficult to wipe your tears in face of your oppressors and in their presence ...

I am proud to be an Oriental Christian, and until now I have tried everything to make peace and strengthen friendly relations between the different communities which form the family of Israel but ... the results are not so shining as they should be. The explanation is to be found in the Prophets, especially Isaiah: we have put our trust in man, not in God. We all try according to our wisdom and understanding to convince our fellow-

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man to keep quiet and we try to appear before him as if he is a friend. Until now we have not behaved as true friends. Violence, from the side of the powerful as well as from the side of the powerless, is always violence. All of us, Jews and Arabs, want to establish peace, or to create peace in material and spiritual ways. But true peace can – to my understanding – only rise out of the individual human being. Peace and love do not simply break through, no matter from what place, and we must not wait for it to appear suddenly. The lack or abundance of understanding and peace are always a result of man's approach or lack of approach to his fellow-man. The relationship is fixed as a result of this approach. The question is not how to convince the other to accept a certain reality or truth, but how to bring about a change and a continuous renewal in one's own attitude. Jews and Arabs believe in the transcendence of God – *God is the Other*. We can know Him in the faces of our brothers and sisters. They are created in his image; male and female He created them. This is the theology of the Face: seeing God in the face of our fellow-man. In this way I see a possibility not only of making peace but also of our being peace-bearers, *irenephoroi*. The light of a small candle is stronger than all the darkness around. Peace is to be created in the hearts of men, not in their surroundings. The question is how to *be*, not how to *behave*.

We must try a new approach. Let us consider what a mosque, a synagogue, a church, ought to be. Every one of us is right in saying: this is the house of "our God – our Father", the house of "our Father our King". All of us, Muslims, Christians or Jews, say the same words: "My Father and my God". All of us are drawn to the presence of God in our houses of Prayer. If we could only turn our heads to the right or to the left, we would perhaps become aware that the others have the same feeling of belonging to the same God. How is it then possible that we turn a deaf ear to our fellow-man and yet pretend to listen and obey the will of God? Here is a sort of aberration in our monotheistic religious approach. Is not here also a deep hypocrisy? Only in the church, the synagogue and the mosque can we call one another "my brother" because of our common Father: God. In other places, I am afraid that we use the name of God for personal and egoist self-justification. A new Isaiah should arise to chasten us over our misuse of God's name.

The present situation of the three religions is a kind of Exile. Exile from God because of Exile from our fellow-man. We must begin by turning ourselves to God and his image: man. The time has come to arrange a spiritual ingathering of the exiles. This must be done by removal of all prejudices through a renewed and truthful examination of our behaviour and of the reactions of our neighbours; through tearing down the fear of our fellow-men and "playing the game" of mutual trust. The preparedness to see in our fellow man a potential friend and no longer a potential danger, let

alone a real enemy, this would be the first step towards a reunion of the synagogue, the church and the mosque. Such an approach goes beyond mere tolerance; it means acceptance of one's neighbour and a preparedness to help him to come to a fuller awareness of this identity. That is peace, kingdom and freedom. Let us be like that.

Translated by Coos Schoneveld

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