Introduction

Palestinian Christians in the West Bank

In June 2006, Congressmen Michael McCaul and Joseph Crowley circulated a proposed resolution for the US. House of Representatives entitled ‘Condemning the Persecution of Palestinian Christians by the Palestinian Authority’ (McCaul and Crowley 2006). Addressing the situation of the indigenous Christians in the Palestinian Territories, the resolution painted a grim picture claiming that Palestinian Christians were ‘forced to follow Islamic law in public or face arrest by Palestinian Authority police’; that Christians were denied access to government jobs and forced to pay extra taxes; and that ‘Muslim extremist and criminals would vandalize Christian holy sites and cemeteries and rape and sexually harass Christian women with impunity’ (McCaul and Crowley 2006:1).

Based on these and other allegations, the resolution argued that Palestinian Christians were the victims of systematic discrimination and prosecution by the Palestinian Authority and by Muslim extremists, making their social situation intolerable and forcing them to leave the Palestinian territories in large numbers.

The contents of this resolution were met with shock and disbelief within the Christian community of Bethlehem. It turned out that neither community leaders nor church representatives had been consulted on the situation of Christians in Palestine. As a response, Palestinian churches, Christian NGOs and the Municipality of Bethlehem issued their own statements, declaring that this resolution was marred by false accusations and that it created a distorted image of a Christian minority disconnected from their own national community. They pointed out that contrary to the McCaul and Crowley resolution, Palestinian Christians have good relations with their Muslim neighbors and that the real aggressor against local Christians is the State of Israel.

In particular, the statements stressed that emigration among Palestinian Christians was fueled not by internal persecution, but by ongoing Israeli policies of collective punishments, the continued growth of settlements, the Separation Wall constructed on Palestinian land, and a policy of closures that has devastated the Bethlehem economy and ruined livelihoods. The following statement from a Bethlehem NGO reflected a widely held concern triggered by the resolution:

By perpetuating the misconception that it is their Muslim neighbors and the Palestinian Authority who are creating this crisis, rather than policies imposed by the Israeli government, congressman McCaul is
In response to strong opposition from Palestinian Christians, but also from various Christian groups in the USA, the draft was never put to a vote in the US House of Representatives, further entrenching the problems facing the Christian community rather than helping to address them.  

SANSOUR 2006:1

The McCaul and Crowley resolution certainly gave a one-sided portrayal of the situation of Palestinian Christians, focusing only on the threats posed by their Muslim neighbors, and neglecting the impact of Israel’s occupation. At the same time, local responses to the resolution were also informed by political considerations in their emphasis on national unity and sectarian harmony among Palestinians. These statements represent two typical views of the situation of Palestinian Christians. However, both views underplay the complexity of their situation. It is this complexity that is the starting point for this book, in which I explore the situation of Palestinian Christians as shaped by internal factors within the Palestinian community, by the effects of an ongoing Israeli occupation, by a history of co-residence and neighborliness with Muslim Palestinians, and by their strong connections with the Western world.

In Post-Mubarak Egypt, violent attacks against Coptic communities and places of worship have served as a tragic reminder that sectarian harmony can be precarious in times of political upheaval (Tadros 2011). What is at stake in Egypt, and what was at stake in Palestine, is not only a factual representation of the situation at hand, but also how the relationship between Christians and Muslims is framed in various settings.

In a region dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and marred by conflicts and warfare along religious and cultural lines, the loyalties and attachments of Palestinian Christians have been a complex and sensitive issue. The McCaul and Crowley draft demonstrated how their circumstances can be simplified and distorted to serve political agendas that conflict with their own lives and interests in the Palestinian Territories. Their cultural norms, ideologies and histories are entangled with those of their Muslim neighbors. They have deep attachments to their land, and they have a proud history of commitment to Palestinian self-determination. While they have long-standing cultural ties with Europe and the Americas, many local Christians also have an ambiguous relationship with Western Christianity. The situation of Christians in the Palestinian Territories involves efforts to maintain local communities, family structures and cultural traditions while adapting to a changing reality. It involves sectarian tensions and mistrust that is related to internal lawlessness and the rise of Palestinian Islamism. It involves suffering and resilience in the

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