

UNITED NATIONS CONCILIATION COMMISSION FOR PALESTINE

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LETTER DATED 20 MAY 1949

ADDRESSED BY THE ANGLICAN BISHOP IN JERUSALEM

TO THE CONCILIATION COMMISSION

Gentlemen,

It is a matter of profound regret to me that owing to my temporary absence in England during most of April I had no opportunity to call upon the Commission in person, though I was glad to have the chance of a brief and unofficial conversation with Mr. Etheridge in Jerusalem in March. I write now because I am told by your remaining staff in Jerusalem that you would welcome a statement of my views in writing on the possible Internationalization of Jerusalem. May I add that if, even at this late stage, the Commission should wish to see and put questions to me, I should be prepared to come to Lausanne for that purpose.

I would first call your attention to Resolution No. 16 of the Lambeth Conference of last year, passed unanimously by a gathering of 329 Bishops of the Anglican Communion throughout the world, including 68 from the United States of America. As a member of that Conference, I subscribe entirely to the Resolution, which runs as follows:-

The Conference feels deep concern for the future of Palestine: it prays that good order and peace may be restored to the land sacred to millions of Christians as well as to Muslims and Jews. It greatly appreciates the efforts made to restore peace and expresses its sympathy with all of every race, and particularly Christians of every Church, who are suffering.

The Conference appeals to the nations of the world to deal with the problem not as one of expediency - political, strategic, or economic - but as a moral and spiritual question that touches a nerve centre of the world's religious life. And for that reason it urges the United Nations to place Jerusalem and its immediate environs under permanent international control, with freedom of access to sacred places secured for the adherents of the three religions.

Nor is this a view of the Anglican Church only. The Near East Committee of the Foreign Missions Conference of the U.S.A., and the Near and Middle East Committee of the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland, both of them bodies representing all the major non-Roman Churches in their respective countries, have passed almost identical resolutions urging that Jerusalem be preserved as an International Zone; while His Holiness the Pope, in his Good Friday Encyclical, asked among other things for (i) an international regime for Jerusalem and its environs, (ii) protection for all the Holy Places, in every part of Palestine, with a guarantee of free access thereto and of peaceful sojourn for the pilgrims. *

One is justified therefore in claiming that internationalization is desired by the overwhelming majority of the Christians of the world. If the voice of Eastern Christianity has been less clearly heard, it is largely because Eastern Christianity, muzzled under centuries of Muslim domination, has now, even if Jerusalem be internationalized, again to look forward either to Muslim or Jewish control in almost the whole Middle East. In spite of Declarations of Human Rights, in spite of religious freedom clauses in Constitutions and Treaties, in spite even of the notable pronouncement of Sir Mohammed Zafrullah Khan to the United Nations General Assembly (Paris, 10 December 1948), Eastern Christendom knows well that religious freedom as interpreted in the West is a thing almost unknown in the Middle East, and indeed a thing contrary to the religious law alike of Islam and Judaism, which attaches civil penalties - e.g. loss of inheritance - to conversion to Christianity. It is within my own personal knowledge that the voice of local Christianity has been largely unheard by previous Commissions on Palestine because local Christians dared not say what they really thought. And however much one may regret and deprecate such fear, one knows that it was not, and is not, groundless.

It would seem that the only possible alternative to Internationalization is the partition of the Holy City as well as the Holy Land - a partition which will presumably follow something like the present dividing line between the two armies. Granted that the practical and administrative difficulties of internationalization are great, will not the difficulties of any such partition be greater? With different languages, currencies and law

* Quoted from Weekly Times, 20 April 1949.

with widely divergent and at the moment bitterly antagonistic cultures and civilizations, and with a very marked difference both in standard of living and cost of living, any attempt to partition the city in peacetime is bound to lead not only to immeasurable inconvenience to peaceable citizens - and particularly foreigners - but also to an almost unimaginable orgy of smuggling, blockade-running, currency control evasion, and every form of underground profiteering - at which the less scrupulous on both sides would seek to outwit each other as well as the law. It is not a promising prospect for a city which for centuries has been, and should ever remain, a place of pilgrimage for non-Palestinians of every race and creed.

The problem is frequently spoken and written about as if it were primarily one of the preservation of the Holy Places. In my own view there are six points which should be made clear:

- i) There is no agreed definition of the term Holy Place, and no agreed schedule of what are or are not Holy Places;
- ii) The specifically Christian Holy Places commonly alluded to as such are in no immediate danger either from Muslim or Jew; though the risk of friction between Christian bodies must be sadly admitted;
- iii) But there remains considerable risk of future conflict over places that are Holy to more than one of the creeds;
- iv) It is quite untrue to say, as has often been said, that all the Holy Places are in the Old City, and would therefore be safeguarded if the Old City alone were internationalized;
- v) There will in any case be an inescapable demand for some supra-national tribunal to protect and adjudicate on Holy Places not only inside but outside Jerusalem - e.g. Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jacob's Well, the Sea of Galilee;
- vi) Any such body would have its task very greatly facilitated if it were charged outright with the civil administration of the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area.*

But more than all these I would urge that the matter is not a problem of Holy Places alone. Important as they are, the possibility for the Christian to live his life in reasonable social and

* In this connection, I believe there would be a very strong desire for the neutral area to be extended to include the Christian town of Ramallah and the neighbouring Christian villages of Bir Zeit and Jifnah.

economic security and practise his creed 'as of right and not on sufferance', is something far greater. The existing partition of Palestine and Jerusalem has given a great deal to the Jew and left something for the Muslim: it has given nothing to the Christian but rather taken away most of what he had, and left him little beyond a tolerated existence. It is significant that on the present division the Arab quarters of the new City which have been ceded to or taken by the Jews are almost entirely the Christian Arab quarters - the German Colony, the Greek Colony, Qatamon, the Upper Baka'a, and Talbiyeh, while much of the central part of the new City, now in Jewish hands, was Christian Church property, on which the shrines and monasteries of the Old City depended for their maintenance. Frankly, it is the universal feeling among Palestinian Christians that the nominally Christian powers of the West have almost cynically abandoned them to their fate because they are a politically inarticulate minority and will not in any case create civil disturbance.

But if I have tried so far to state the Christian case for internationalization, I should not wish it to be thought that this is only for the benefit of the Christian. I believe it to be the best for Jerusalem and for Palestine as a whole. 'Jerusalem is built as a city that is a unity in itself'. One of the last publications of the Mandatory Government was a book of plans for the future physical development of the City. To partition Jerusalem now is not only to jettison those plans: it is to render any other plans for ever impossible, to deprive one of the spiritual centres of the world forever of any chance of a worthy physical setting.

Further, in a strife that has lasted for millenia between Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, it is submitted that the Christian element has a valuable part to play as mediator. Previous Commissions on Palestine have pointed out that only in Christian schools were Arabs and Jews found learning to work and play together. On the present partition basis, Christians (both Arab and Jewish) are being squeezed out of the country altogether: with an adequate international enclave - a laboratory in which to work out the world's problems of social reconciliation - the Christian element could and would return with new hope and new vigor, to help as a solvent of one of the world's oldest and deepest hatreds.

Believe me to be, Gentlemen,

Yours faithfully,

Sgd/ Weston
Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem

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Jerusalem

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