

*In Jerusalem the Orthodox hierarchy remains  
at the center of sanctity and strife*

## RELIGIOUS COLONIALISM & ETHNIC AWAKENING

by Thomas A. Idinopulos

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, traditional site of Jesus' tomb, Greek Archbishop Diodoros was installed in March, 1981, as the new Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, one of the five ancient Orthodox patriarchates, is headquarters for a church whose domain is Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian West Bank and whose flock consists almost entirely of Arabs—some 120,000 in Jordan and 40,000 in Israel and the West Bank.

Many of Jerusalem's Christian, Jewish, and Arab leaders attended the installation ceremony at the twelfth-century Romanesque-Gothic church, as did representatives of the more than fifty local Orthodox, Catholic, Uniate, Monophysite, and Protestant communities. But loud shouts—Palestinian rebel yells—were reserved for the entrance of Karem Khalaf, Arab mayor of neighboring Ramallah, who was carried in on a wooden chair. Khalaf, himself Greek Orthodox and a vigorous supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organization, has been a hero to Jerusalem and West Bank Arabs ever since a terrorist bomb shattered his legs in June, 1980. He was at the church to dramatize the conviction of the Arab Orthodox that the future of the church lies not with the Greek hierarchy but with the laity.

The *Kyrie eleisons*, the sweet incense rising to the dome of the church, the glittering gold ikons evoked the glory of the Greek priesthood during four centuries of Ottoman rule in Palestine. But the majority of the Eastern Orthodox always have been Arab, and the dramatic entrance of Khalaf was a vivid reminder of their continuing grievances against the Greeks. At least half a century before the Zionist-Palestinian rivalry began, Arabs were struggling against Greeks for control of church property and ecclesiastical power. In fact, this confrontation between religious colonialism and ethnic self-awakening had begun four hundred years before. It is a history worth repeating, for all the elements of the confrontation are very much alive in Jerusalem today. (In citing this history, I rely upon

the excellent study by Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843-1914*, The Clarendon Press, 1969.)

### "YOU DO NOT LOVE BUT DESPISE THEM"

The conflict took root in 1517 after the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem and Palestine. Orthodox Arabs found themselves grouped with Albanians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, and other ethnic peoples in just one Orthodox *millet* (or nation) with the Orthodox Ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople at its head. The Turks, who needed and trusted their Greek advisors, appointed a Greek bishop to the post and gave him immense legal, financial, and religious power. In a short time the once proud patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem became financially and politically dependent on Constantinople. The Jerusalem patriarch was no longer locally elected but appointed by the patriarch of Constantinople, in whose city he was compelled to live.

The first sign of Arab discontent with the Greek hierarchy occurred in the early eighteenth century, when Orthodox churches in Galilee split from the Patriarchate to join a number of Syrian churches, becoming the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church in union with Rome. Greek Catholic and, later, other Catholic groups began actively to seek converts from Orthodox Arab churches. In the nineteenth century this missionary work was led by Jesuits, who constructed numerous schools for Arabs throughout Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Smaller numbers of Orthodox Arabs found a new home with the Anglican, Lutheran, and Presbyterian missions that had begun to proselytize among both Arabs and Jews.

The Greek hierarchy looked with displeasure on all these missionary activities but was not alarmed. The real threat to their power and privilege, they believed, lay with the Franciscans and Armenians, and they took a position on the Patriarchate of Jerusalem that continues to this day: Its primary responsibility is the safeguarding of Christian shrines in the Holy Land and only secondarily the tending of the needs of the Orthodox Arab community. Well before the Ottoman conquest Greeks were fighting with Franciscans, Ar-

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menians, and others for control of the shrines. Orthodox-Catholic relations throughout the Ottoman period may be characterized as a war for possession of the holy places. The Turks stage-managed these events, taking away rights from one church and bestowing them on another whenever it suited their own interests or pocketbooks. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Greeks largely had won the battle, securing from the sultan in 1852 a decree that gave them preeminence in both the Holy Sepulchre and Nativity churches. Successive British, Jordanian, and Israeli governments, guided by their own self-interest, have upheld Greek control of the holy places.

In the sixty-five years since the Ottoman period the Orthodox Arabs have been the certain loser. The British failed to keep their promise to reform the Patriarchate by granting Orthodox Arabs a voice in patriarchal elections and appointments. The Jordanians, first under Abdallah and later under Hussein, introduced minor changes, which proved of little benefit. The Israelis want no change at all in the administration of the Patriarchate, viewing the Greek bishops as tacitly opposed to Arab independence.

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the Orthodox Arabs found their voice. They began to complain about arrogant Greek priests who disdained the Arab laity, and they expressed their resentment of the hierarchy's indifference to the local Arab communities. The Greeks had permitted Arab churches to deteriorate and had no plans for building new ones. Most Arab priests were uneducated, some even illiterate. Lacking knowledge of Orthodox tradition beyond the ability to recite the liturgical service, they were forbidden to deliver sermons. With the blessing of the Greek hierarchy, most Arab priests married and thus became ineligible for promotion to bishop or appointment to the celibate Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre. The Patriarchate paid them subsistence wages, forcing them to rely on fees from baptisms, weddings, and funerals to feed their families. Monies from Russia and other Orthodox countries for the upkeep of the Palestinian church went directly into the pockets of the bishops and the patriarch. Arabs grew to hate the many titular bishops, without actual dioceses, who disdained pastoral duties and engaged in worldly pursuits.

The typical Greek contempt for the Orthodox Arab was expressed in 1844 by Cyril, then bishop of Lydda, to Russian Archmandrite Porfiri Ouspensky:

- Cyril: The Arabs are rascals....They hate and defame us. You have no affection for us and defend them.
- Porfiri: God knows the extent of my love towards you, but I pity the Arabs and I am prepared to defend them before anyone.
- Cyril: They have no faith; they are barbarians, villains.
- Porfiri: You must teach them faith, for you have fostered their unbelief.
- Cyril: They will not listen to us.
- Porfiri: That is not surprising, for you do not love but despise them. They are a martyr people. They are persecuted by the Muslims yet receive

no protection from you. They even have nowhere to pray. The village churches are in a most miserable condition.

Cyril: You forget that we are under the Turkish yoke.

Porfiri: That does not prevent you from repairing and...decorating the churches....The priests do not understand their duties. They keep their cattle in church. When they ask for help you refuse to see them....

Cyril: We do not accept Arab priests among us so as not to lower our episcopal dignity....Nor do we understand their language.

Porfiri: Why not learn Arabic, or if you are too old, why not have an interpreter to forward their requests?

Cyril: We cannot introduce new customs.

Ouspensky had been sent to Palestine to investigate the situation of the Orthodox Church and stayed long enough to change Cyril's mind about Arabs. Cyril, when later named patriarch, took up the Arab cause.

### APPEASEMENT

Three successive events help to explain why Orthodox Arabs began to voice criticism of the Greek hierarchy in the mid-nineteenth century. The first was the Greek War of Independence (1822-23), which fractured the Orthodox *millet* and made it desirable for Arabs to distance themselves from ethnic Greeks, no longer viewed as trustworthy Ottoman subjects. The second event was the takeover of Palestine in 1830 by the Egyptian Ibrahim Pasha, who introduced legal, social, and economic reforms that benefited Christian Arabs. The third event, from the late 1840s, was the entry on the scene of Russian religious and political figures, who tended to side with Arabs against Greeks.

The Arab revolt in Jerusalem in 1872 is cited as a turning point in the Arab-Greek struggle. What precipitated it was the decision of the Bulgarian Church in 1870 to dismiss its Greek bishops and declare independence from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Bulgarian Orthodox had been suffering the same isolation, neglect, and Greek domination as had the Arabs. The Bulgarian action was encouraged by the Russians, who were eager to support separatist movements that weakened the Ottoman Empire. In 1872 the patriarch of Constantinople convened a conference that declared the Bulgarian Church schismatic. To the surprise of the Greeks, the only dissenting vote was that of Cyril.

No sooner was Cyril's vote recorded than the Greek bishops in Jerusalem struck back, demanding—and receiving—his deposition. With Russian encouragement Orthodox Arabs publicly demonstrated their support of Cyril. In Hopwood's opinion, the "Orthodox Arab national movement dates from this moment."

In the post-Ottoman period after 1917 Arab demands for an Arab patriarch and Arab supervision of the financial affairs of the Jerusalem Patriarchate became louder. In the early twentieth century, Greek Patriarch Damianos and his successor, Timotheos,

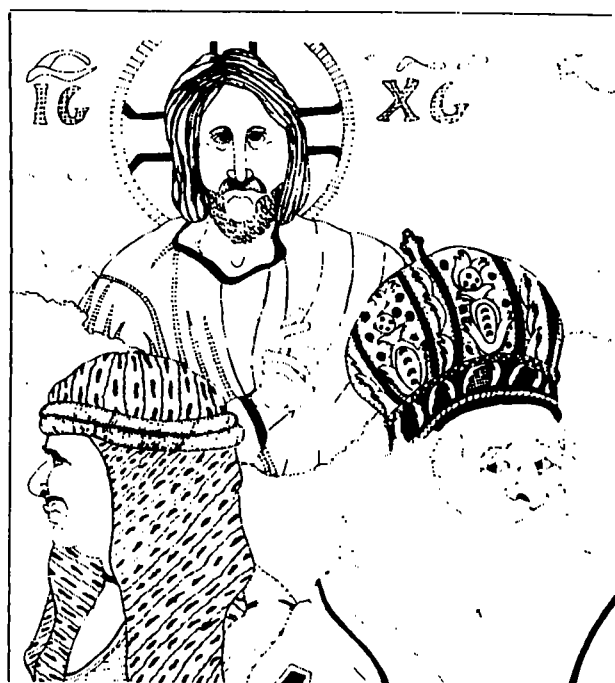
found themselves under pressure from British Mandate authorities to propose reforms, but they avoided enacting any. With the election of Patriarch Benedictos in February, 1957, changes were initiated by Jordan at the insistence of the Arab laity of Jerusalem. Benedictos's election was unique in that both Arab and Greeks participated in it; and because the country was now politically divided, both Jordanians and Israelis played a part too. Only two months before the election, the Jordanian parliament introduced draft legislation for new rules of governance in the Jerusalem Patriarchate that would directly benefit Arab interests. The Arab laity was given a role in the financial affairs of the Patriarchate; among the qualifications for the office of patriarch was Jordanian citizenship and the ability to read and write Arabic to perfection; and further, "in order to be a bishop or priest, a person must be a citizen of Jordan or another Arab state and must be able to read and write Arabic well." King Hussein approved the election of Benedictos because the patriarch supported the proposed new rules. But no sooner had the Greek been installed in office than Benedictos sought to turn Jordanian politicians against the rules, which died in committee.

After his election Patriarch Benedictos appeased Arabs by appointing an Arab to the post of bishop, the first in modern times. But the defeat of the proposed legislation had the effect of eliminating for more than two decades the possibility of winning the Patriarchate from the Greeks. It was the old story, but now Jordan played the leading role: Its parliamentarians obviously preferred a strong Greek influence to anything that might lend political strength to the volatile and uncertain West Bank Palestinians. And this brings us to Benedictos's successor, Patriarch Diodoros.

#### THE NEW MAN

Diodoros, fifty-nine, is a native of the Aegean island of Chios. He came to Jerusalem in 1938 to attend the Orthodox high school, receiving his theological degree from the University of Athens. Diodoros served for nineteen years as the prelate in Jordan, where he did a credible job of building up the Arab school system. He was King Hussein's personal choice for patriarch.

Not surprisingly, Israelis are apprehensive about Diodoros's election, which they interpret as another step toward Arabization of the churches in the Holy Land. Increased Arab control of the Latin Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches, along with the completely Arabized large Greek "Melkite" Church, has resulted in increased sympathy for Palestinian political goals among Christian Arabs and greater hostility toward the Israeli Government. Israeli officials had made no secret of their support for Diodoros's rival, Archbishop Basileos, whom they expected would con-



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tinue the cooperation with Israel that marked the reign of Benedictos.

During the enthronement ceremony Diodoros indicated his awareness of the delicacy of the situation. His sermon, delivered in Greek and translated only into Arabic, was confined to spiritual matters. At its end, various dignitaries were led up to him, including Israel's representative, Deputy Prime Minister Yigael Yadin, for whom Diodoros made the unusual gesture of stepping down from his throne chair to exchange kisses. Today, it is still unclear whether Diodoros means to repudiate Patriarch Benedictos's policies and to signal a new "Arab turn" in the Church. The Israelis, though, make no secret of their wish that the Greek bishops retain control of the patriarchate hierarchy. As Khalaf's dramatic entrance attests, the Arab laity too cannot easily be ignored.

Following the ceremony, Patriarch Diodoros left the Holy Sepulchre for a lavish reception at the patriarch's private residence on the Mount of Olives, the site upon which, according to Acts 1:11, the apostles witnessed the ascension of Jesus. Here, Arab mayors squeezed against Israeli military officers, and bishops of every church exchanged greetings with Muslim dignitaries and politicians of every variety. The guests ate, drank, and talked with relish. One close observer of the Jerusalem scene noted that if the Greeks could keep their guests partying all night, the problems of a troubled Jerusalem might be cut in half by the end of the week. **[WV]**