

## One on One: At cross purposes

By [RUTHIE BLUM](#) (The Jerusalem Post, FEATURES SECTION)

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'If you don't cut the ivy, it takes over the tree,' says Petra Heldt, head of the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, an organization established in 1987 to facilitate dialogue among the various Christian denominations operating simultaneously in the Holy Land.

This, according to Heldt - a Lutheran minister from Germany who has resided here for the better part of three decades - is "the nature of bureaucracy."

Indeed, asserts the 56-year-old faithful Protestant and proud friend of Israel, "bureaucratic systems are parasitical, and when they infiltrate beautiful environments, such as the church and the State of Israel, they wreak havoc and destruction."

Another issue about which the petite Heldt pulls no powerful punches is "dhimmitude," the physical and psychological condition of non-Muslims living in Islam-dominated societies - a condition she says can be like "that of battered wives or abused children."

When she sees her two pet peeves often meeting and feeding off one another - as in the case of the recent statements made by the archbishop of Canterbury about Shari'a and British law - Heldt expresses as much public outrage as caution permits. After all, she admits, she neither wants to offend nor get anybody into trouble - including, perhaps, herself. But then, she, too, has to deal with more than one hierarchical, bureaucratic system - namely, the state church back home and the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus. She, too, is part of a community that suffers from, or is influenced by, "dhimmi-mindedness." And she, too - like so many Israelis - was the victim of a terrorist attack (in July 1997, at the Mahaneh Yehuda market) that landed her in intensive care at Hadassah-University Medical Center for five weeks, followed by years of rehabilitation, and scars on her hands and face that will be with her forever.

The kind of balancing act that Heldt seems to perform as a matter of course is apparent during our hour-long interview at the apartment in Jerusalem's Baka neighborhood which she shares with her husband, scholar Malcolm Lowe.

"Let me put it another way," she says, equivocating certain answers, as though fearing the force - or consequences - of her candor. "I am only speaking about some of the local Christians."

Delicacy and professionalism aside, the words she does choose carefully (in English as fluent as her Hebrew) - are as clear as they come.

### **What is the "demography" of Christian churches in this country?**

There are four different "families" of churches here, representing virtually the entire spectrum of churches in the world: the Oriental Orthodox, the Byzantine Orthodox, the Catholic and the Protestant. Each of these families is divided into many different branches.

### **Are there theological, ideological or political splits among the different branches, or are they homogeneous?**

They are rather homogeneous theologically. But it wasn't until the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967 that they were able to work together. From the Byzantine period in the seventh century, when the Muslims took over Jerusalem, until 1967, all the Christians in the Middle East were under Muslim rule, apart from the interludes of the Crusaders and the British Mandate. Thus, their relations were hampered. That changed after the reunification of Jerusalem. For the first time, the Christians in Israel's vicinity had the opportunity to work together face to face. This enabled them to begin to tackle huge mutual prejudices that had been built up systematically, as a result of their inability to speak to and get to know each other.

### **How did this change in 1967?**

One who encouraged change was former mayor Teddy Kollek, who said: "It's ridiculous that you are not working together," and he began projects in the Old City to support Christians and encourage us to get to know each other. Many of us were extremely happy about this. Others were less so. Being a *dhimmi* [a non-Muslim in a state governed according to Shari'a law] for 1,500 years, people are not psychologically ready from one day to the next to embrace those who are liberating them - particularly among the leadership.

In Jerusalem, there are two claims on the Christians, one from the Israeli side and the other from the Palestinian. As a Muslim entity, the Palestinian Authority has an attitude toward Christians that is in keeping with dhimma culture. This includes Christians' not being free to speak out against difficulties deriving from policies of the PA or the Palestinian people. Christians have to support the Palestinian party line. If they don't, the punishment can be severe.

### **What kind of punishment?**

For example, a Christian in the PA who does not adhere to this might be hit by a car. I was told of such a case in Bethlehem. This is why you rarely hear from any Christian in the Palestinian areas about the rape of Christian girls or the violation of Christian property.

### **From whom do you hear about such things, then - from those who have fled to other countries?**

No. For one thing, they leave family behind on whom revenge can be taken. For another, they remain dhimmis in their mentality. The psychology of a dhimmi is such that even if he is free from the oppressive situation, he is not free in his mind. It is like the psychology of battered wives or abused children, who deny ever having been abused. In fact, when dhimmi-minded people move to other parts of the world, they often act like their former oppressors.

### **Then how do you know about rape and other incidents against Christians in Palestinian areas?**

There are researchers in Israel, such as [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs Scholar-in-Residence] Justus Reid Weiner, who have written about it. The Jerusalem Post, too, has exposed this over the last few years.

### **And this predates the Hamas takeover?**

Of course! All you have to do is study the history of the Christians in the Middle East in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries.

### **Are most Christians here Arabs?**

Yes and no. The majority of the Christians in the Holy Land live in Israel - approximately 135,000 - and about 30,000 in the West Bank. Most of those living in Israel are Arabs. They are Israeli citizens, but have the identity of Arabs. Though often of European ancestry, when they came to the country, as dhimmis they were forced to speak Arabic as their only language. Many of them subsequently forgot their original mother tongues, as well as their identity, because where language goes, memory and history follow. Today, however, they also speak Hebrew very well, and feel like Israelis. They often do well in Israel. They have their livelihood, good education, etc. I mean, like everybody else, they have to struggle. But, you know, it's basically fine for them in Israel. Not so for their compatriots in the Palestinian areas. Still, even many of the Israeli Christians - especially those living in Galilee - have grown more and more influenced by the Palestinian mind-set.

**Does the fact that Arabic is the language of the Koran have an effect on Arabic-speaking Christians here? Is there any Islamic influence on the theology?**

The cultural aspects of their lives are certainly influenced. However, I understand that Christians often make a very clear distinction between themselves and Muslims.

**Can you put this in the context of the archbishop of Canterbury's recent controversial statements about Shari'a law fitting in with the British legal system, pointing to Christian claims of religious rights within the surrounding secular democracy?**

The implication of his statements is a call for an end to the legal system's monopoly on social laws in Britain. By indicating that Britain's millennia-old legal system, which is based on Judaeo-Christian values, should be joined by aspects of Shari'a, he is saying that cultural loyalty should be superior to state loyalty. In other words, what the leader of the Church of England is suggesting is that the established ancient British majority has no special rights.

When Chrysostom, a fifth-century church writer - with whom the archbishop is certainly familiar - commented on the sale of Joseph by his brothers to savages, he exclaimed: "What an unlawful contract! What baleful profit! What illicit sale! What unlawful frenzy!" Indeed, whenever complacent leaders - like Joseph's brothers - sell out their own kin, society is left demoralized.

Complacency - which includes self-righteousness and self-satisfaction - produces a loss of civic courage, particularly among the ruling and intellectual elite, which creates the impression of a loss of courage on the part of society as a whole. Loss of courage is replaced by a clinging to legalism which eats up morality. This is the danger of attitudes like the one expressed by the archbishop of Canterbury.

But there's another point here. Those who have been claiming that the analysis of [*Eurabia* author] Bat Ye'or - according to which "Eurabia" is the geopolitical reality born out of the 1973 Arab vision of creating a system of informal alliances between the European Union and the Mediterranean Arab countries - is a figment of her imagination or a conspiracy theory, need only to look at the archbishop's statements.

**Moving on to Christian-Jewish relations, what brought you to Israel originally?**

Studies. Unlike other places in the world, Israel has a sampling of all the different churches. More importantly, coming from Germany, I felt compelled to know more about the Holocaust, Israel and Judaism, none of which I could have studied in Germany at that time.

**Did you have any realizations or revelations after coming here?**

Yes, it was a whole new world, which I hadn't been exposed to. And though I had already finished my studies, I understood that I would have to start afresh.

**Why?**

It turned out that I had studied under insufficient tutelage: insufficient concerning history; insufficient concerning the interpretation of the Bible; insufficient concerning languages; insufficient concerning Judaism, the Jewish people and Israel - insufficient in so many ways that I had gotten only a very squeezed line of thinking. Here in Israel, a more comprehensive thinking started.

**Do you view your peers outside of Israel as having a limited understanding of what's going on here as a result?**

Absolutely. I now understand what Europe is facing - a bureaucratic structure that was born out of the Enlightenment that began in the 19th century. Though there were still people with enough religious motivation to support what is now called "Judaean-Christian" culture, religion in Europe became increasingly replaced by secularism. And secularism has always been a philosophy advanced by some group or other with an ulterior motive and drive for self-advancement.

By the time I started my studies in 1971, as I see it now, the field of theology had deteriorated. Basically, there were only remnants of a glory past.

**Wasn't it peculiar, then, that you even chose theology as your field?**

No. You see, religion is not merely dependent on a bureaucratic structure. Religion has to do with spirituality and the intellect, with research and prophecy, all of which can be structured and monitored by the church as a communion of saints, but hardly by its bureaucracy. Now, what you have in many Protestant churches in the world today is a bureaucratic superstructure which, in many ways, is less democratic than the state in which it exists. If you occupy the top tier of such a superstructure, you have the money and the media, and thereby the power.

But a split has emerged between the bureaucratic hierarchy and the people in the pews. And though the latter far outnumber some of the so-called leaders, they don't have the money; and if among them there are any leaders, those are brushed aside and pushed out by the people in the hierarchy. This is very sad, because it is in the pews that you find the beauty of Christianity.

I'm speaking about some Protestant churches, not about the Catholic and Orthodox churches. For example, in the Orthodox churches, you will not find a "shoah." Nor will you find a brushing aside of Israel.

**If so, why did remain a Lutheran? Why didn't you choose a different church?**

Well, first of all I'm German, and rooted in my culture. Also, I love my church. I have a commitment and a calling to be in that church.

**Is the structure of the Lutheran church in Israel similar to or different from that in Germany?**

Strictly speaking, I do not belong to the Lutheran church, but to the Protestant state church, of which the Lutherans are one part. In Germany, if you say you are a Lutheran, you are making a statement of distinction. Here in Israel, people don't make this distinction. They speak about the Lutheran church, and I do as well, just to simplify things.

The German Protestant church in the Old City is the Redeemer Church; and on the Mount of Olives, the Kaiser Augusta Victoria Compound church represents the state church. So, if the representative here is a Lutheran, it is by chance.

There is also a Palestinian Arab Lutheran church, which is independent of our church but is permitted to use the Redeemer Church as well. Our German church tries to balance between its commitments to Israel and to the Arab Lutherans. But the latter have no choice but to toe the Palestinian political line and give that message to Lutherans elsewhere in the world. The same goes for the Arab Anglicans.

**Does this explain divestment?**

Absolutely, though that was planned at [the] Durban [conference] - and heavily supported here. The church leaders abroad don't know what they're talking about. Their main view of the Holy Land is through the lens of their Palestinian counterparts.

**Regarding your own view of the Holy Land, do you refer to yourself as a Christian Zionist?**

"Christian Zionist" has become a loaded label - a catchword. But 10-20 years ago, I would have been surprised to hear of any Christian's not being a Zionist. If you are a Bible-believing Christian, you necessarily have a deep attachment to Israel, and to the Jewish people to whom the land was given by God.

**Many Jews could raise an eyebrow at this statement. In spite of what you said about those churches that didn't undergo an enlightenment not being Nazis, the fact is that Christians have killed Jews throughout the ages. How do you respond to that?**

Well, there has always been this element of irreligiosity - a certain kind of secularism or bureaucratism - which was used by political forces. But there has always been the other side within the church, as well. At the time of Luther, for example, when there were terrible pogroms against Jews, there were Christians in Central Europe called the Sabbatians (for their celebration of Shabbat), who stood with the Jews. And they were killed along with the Jews, to the extent that 100 years later, none remained.

There have always been groups like this. During the Holocaust, there were many church groups and Christian intellectuals who sided with the Jews, for reasons of faith.

But those who expressed their viewpoints were often the first to be killed, even before the Jews. Killing them served two purposes - as a warning to others, and as a method of eliminating their leadership. After the war, there were very few people left to even remember them. Those who did remember were too scared to write the history of those who had been killed.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to whitewash the Holocaust in any way, certainly not as someone who comes from the country where it all happened. But it is not the whole story.

Now today, there are many Christian Zionists in Germany and all over. Some of them are represented in Israel by the International Christian Embassy. And they constitute a major trend in Christianity, with roots going back to the Reformation.

### **Aren't they Evangelicals?**

Well, yes, but I don't like to use that word, because it, too, has become a political label. They are Protestants.

### **The Christian Allies Caucus of the Knesset was established for cooperation with this community. Why, then, is the government trying to take away the visas of Christian Embassy staff members? Who are their main opponents?**

Those who think that Israel is better off cooperating with the Muslim world than with the Christian.

### **If the Christian Embassy suddenly started trumpeting support for the Annapolis process, do you believe the visa business would end?**

Overnight, I'm sure. [She laughs.] In fact, the Catholic and Orthodox churches also have big problems obtaining visas for their clergy and workers.

### **What about Jewish fears that Christian Zionists are engaged in proselytizing and adhere to replacement theology?**

Unfortunately and justifiably, there is an undercurrent of suspicion among different Jewish groups who have had a bad experience with Christianity. Using their fears for political purposes is very easy. All one has to do is keep feeding them the idea that the Christians only want to proselytize and replace - and see the end of the State of Israel - and they will remain wary. But, of course, it is utterly false propaganda.

### **How is it that you don't resent Israel and Israelis for their suspicions on the one hand, and political opposition on the other?**

Personally, I've had wonderful experiences. When I was the victim of the terrorist attack in 1997, I got the most beautiful and ethical support imaginable from individuals and from the state. The way people act here as human beings is unbelievable. Though they're a bit rough and all the rest of it, they have such good hearts.

In any case, if you are a Christian, you are faithful to God and to God's word, independent of any political agenda. This is one of the reasons a group of us is in the process of setting up a patristic study center and seeking supporters for the endeavor. We want to invite scholars and students from all over the world to Jerusalem to study the history of the early church and the relationship between Jews and Christians during that period, in order to start rebuilding this kind of study that was abandoned a decade or so ago. We want to focus on the history, because history tells you a lot. We will study the importance of the church and the Jewish people, and to make Christians understand that a church needs the close connection with Judaism and the Jewish people.

**Yet, some say that anti-Semitism began with the early church fathers.**

It began before the Christian era. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote a whole work documenting and refuting pagan anti-Semitism, including blood libels and claims that the Jews were an inferior race. As for the church fathers, of course they had some deep disagreements with the Jews. Yet they also have positive statements about Jews in their writings. At the same time, one must recognize that Jewish issues were not at all the focal point in those writings. In our limited understanding of the texts of the early church, they have been interpreted in an increasingly anti-Jewish manner since the time of the Enlightenment. But now, due to archeological findings and further insights from ancient writings - Qumran would be one example - we have a much better understanding of the early period of time. And when put in the context of the time, the texts present quite a different viewpoint.

As someone of faith, do you fear for Israel's future, or believe that it is safe?

I have great faith in the word of the Bible, and I don't see that God is going to destroy Israel. The future of Israel seems to be secure. How it will be worked out politically in everyday life I have no idea. But [she laughs], I think human beings have the capacity to mess up a lot.