

Israelis insist: Christians have it great in Jewish state

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 13, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

“Holy Land” has long been a dicey bit of vocabulary for some Jews, who historically tended to see it either as a Christian way of planting a flag in the region, or simply as a circumlocution to avoid saying “Israel.”

These days, a new sensitivity has been added to the mix: Talk of a Christian exodus from the Holy Land, many Jews in Israel and elsewhere argue, obscures the fact that Christians have it better in Israel than virtually anywhere else in the Middle East.

That’s an important claim for Israel, not only because of its self-image as the region’s lone true democracy, but in light of the massive financial and military support that flows from the United States — where a perception of a hostile climate for Christians in Israel could have damaging political repercussions.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: [Index of stories from the Synod](#) [1].

Given that backdrop, Israelis are taking pains in and around the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East to paint a largely rosy picture of Christian life in the Jewish state. That argument was made again today by Rabbi David Rosen, who was invited to address the synod on behalf of the Grand Rabbinate of Israel.

“Objectively speaking, the situation in Israel is totally incomparable to the situation of Christians anywhere else in the Middle East,” Rosen said during a morning press conference ahead of his speech.

Rosen said that without denying that problems remain, “there is every reason to be optimistic.”

Rosen argued that talking about the situation of Christians in the Holy Land is “very confusing,” because it glosses over massive differences between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, are living the drama of a people struggling towards nationhood, while Israelis, including Israeli Christians, live in a robust, if still immature, democracy.

Christians in Israel, Rosen said, “are beneficiaries of the democratic nature of Israeli society,” and have taken advantage of the “educational, professional and economic opportunities” that society offers. As an example, Rosen said that graduation rates in Christian schools are actually higher than the Jewish average.

Rosen is a longtime veteran of Jewish/Catholic dialogue, who holds a papal knighthood in recognition of his efforts.

Moreover, Rosen argued, there is no exodus of Christians out of Israel — on the contrary, the Christian population has swelled to include not just an estimated 120,000 Arab Christians, but also some 50,000 recent

immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as well as almost a million new migrant workers from Asia and Africa, a large percentage of whom are also Christian.

That's a point made just ahead of the opening of the synod by the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See, containing data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. Overall, the report says that the Christian population of Israel has climbed from 34,000 in 1949 to 150,700 in 2008, without taking account of the foreign worker population. In Jerusalem, according to the report, Christians are 15 percent of the total population.

The report claimed that the rate of growth of the Christian population in Israel is basically the same as that of Israeli Jews, with whom the Christians share socio-economic characteristics.

That news release said it was responding to repeated insinuations of a decline in the Christian presence in Israel.

Rosen argued that the complaints often voiced by Christians in Israel are not related to any specific religious animus, but rather broader social and political realities.

Arab Christians often complain about social prejudice and a lack of freedom of movement imposed on them by Israeli authorities. At Bethlehem University of the Holy Land, for instance, run by the Brothers of the Holy Cross, authorities routinely say that it's an ordeal for students who live in the Palestinian Territories to arrive for class because of the difficulties of getting past Israel's security fence.

Rosen suggested that's mostly because they're Arabs rather than Christians.

East Jerusalem and the Palestine Territories are struggling for self-determination, and sometimes those conflicts are violent, he said. If Israelis perceive a threat, they're not going to ask Palestinians if they're Christians or Muslims.

In practice, he said, Arab Christians find themselves inevitably caught between a hammer and an anvil.

Yet outside the disputed territories, Rosen said for example, in the northern Galilee region centered on Nazareth Christian communities are actually flourishing.

Rosen argued that charges of legal and political discrimination have more to do with the dynamics of Israel's raw, young democracy than with any hostility to Christians as such. Social groups concentrated outside the major urban areas of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa, he said, find it harder to get the goodies because their political access is more limited.

In truth, Rosen said, there is no malevolence towards Christians in Israel. Instead, he said, the real problem is that Christians are usually off the radar, and thus the vast majority of Israeli Jews are not aware of positive developments in Christian/Jewish relations.

Rosen also addressed the controversy surrounding a proposed new oath that would require new citizens to swear loyalty to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. While expressing opposition to the oath because it's clearly targeted at preventing Arabs from coming in and influencing the demographic make-up of society, Rosen also said the idea of a Jewish state has been misunderstood.

It has nothing to do, Rosen insisted, with theocracy.

The term Jewish is not used by Israel in a theological sense, he said. It's not about Judaism as a religion controlling the lives of citizens.

Instead, Rosen said, calling Israel "Jewish" is analogous to "Italian" or "French," in that it expresses the cultural identity of the country's majority. It's not intended, he said, to "disenfranchise people who are not part of that majority."

Moreover, Rosen said, most Israelis have no appetite for theocracy.

"The reality of the Sabbath in Israel," he said, "is seen not in the synagogues of Jerusalem but on the beaches of Tel Aviv." He added that he personally wishes more Israeli Jews would go to the synagogues, "but not because anyone forces them."

In fact, Rosen said, there is at least one area where Israeli Christians are actually comfortable with something less than complete democracy: laws governing marriage and divorce. Israel still follows the Ottoman practice of allowing religious courts to handle those matters, which means shariah courts for Muslims, church courts for Christians, and rabbinical tribunals for Jews. As a result, marriage outside one's own faith community is a complicated, and sometimes impossible, undertaking.

Rosen said he'd like to see marriage and divorce transferred to civil courts, because it gives religion a bad name when people perceive coercion. In making that argument to some Christian bishops, however, he said he's run into opposition.

"They say it serves their interests, allowing their communities to flourish," he said. "They don't want the maximal civil options. They want to preserve their communities."

After Rosen's address today, tomorrow two Muslims will speak to the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: an advisor to the Grand Mufti of Beirut, Mohammed al-Sammak, a Sunni, and Ayatollah Sayed Mostafa Muhagag Ahmadabadi, a professor of Islamic Law in Iran and a Shiite.

In a microcosm of the extreme delicacy in Jewish/Muslim relations these days, Rosen said he knows both men, and is a personal friend of Sammak. Yet there will be no photo-op handshake among the three "in part, he said, because both Muslims have political reasons for "not wanting to be seen with me."

NCR's coverage of the Middle East Synod can be found at http://ncronline.org/mideast_synod

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