

Israel: Strictly separating religion and politics - an interview with Patriarch Fouad Twal

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Prohibition of evangelisation, attacks on churches by radical settlers, the burden of Church history: Israel has its problems with Christianity – an interview with the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal.

Interview by Oliver Maksan (Die Tagespost)



Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal

Q) Your Beatitude, Catholic clergy in Israel constantly complain that ultra-orthodox Jews spit in their path. Is this form of anti-Catholicism representative of the country?

A) It is not so much anti-Catholic as anti-Christian prejudice. Consider the most recent graffiti attacks against an Orthodox and a Baptist church in Jerusalem. They were probably perpetrated by radical settlers who do not distinguish between Catholics and other Christian denominations. That's why they wrote "Death to Christians" on the Baptist church. They mean all of us. To that extent, we Christians here in the Holy Land are all sitting in the same boat. In fact, our clergy, as well as Armenian and Orthodox clergy, often experience what you mentioned in the beginning in everyday life – both as individuals and during processions through Jerusalem's Old City, for instance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I have spoken about this with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. They condemn what some settlers and ultra-orthodox Jews do. But apologies and condemnations are not enough. The Jewish side needs to think about where behaviour like spitting before a priest comes from. In my opinion, the root lies in education. Young people are taught such behaviour in the religious schools.

Q) What did the Chief Rabbinate say to that?

A) They agreed with me. But nothing is going to change. But in fairness, I have to say that there are also positive relationships to Judaism. We are organised in a Council of Religions. And several rabbis were the first to condemn the graffiti on churches just mentioned. But we Christians never forget that even our Lord himself suffered and was mocked in Jerusalem. Why should we have it any better than He?

Q) But in view of the Judeo-Christian history – the Spanish Inquisition, pogroms, forced conversions – isn't it understandable that many of Israel's Jews distrust Christians, at least on a latent level?

A) But they distrust everyone! They are afraid of the past, the present, the future. They teach their children this fear. That is also why they do not look at the cross, and spit before it. One cannot live solely in the past. Jews have suffered, certainly, but Christians as well. Certainly the Holocaust was terrible. But don't forget that it was the Catholic Poles who were the first victims of the anti-Christian Nazis. We pray for all victims. Be one should face

the future and make an effort toward dialogue and communication. I have a dream that someday, Jewish, Christian and Moslem children can live together and have a joint future. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem likely right now.

Q) Christian Zionists see today's State of Israel as a sign of God's covenant with His people. As the Catholic Bishop of Jerusalem, do you share this theological concept?

A) No. The State of Israel is one state among many in the international community of nations. It is bound by international law. Its existence as such has nothing to do with the Bible. If we start with this, then the Moslems will start in with the Koran and so on. That leads to nothing but unrest. We need to strictly separate religion and politics. The Christian Zionists don't do that. We Catholics do.

Q) In addition to this unconditional, theologically motivated support for Israel, however, the Christian Zionists also evangelise Jews. What is the position of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land on the evangelisation of the Jews?

A) Evangelisation in Israel is prohibited by law, because it is seen as an attack on the Jewish character of the state. The Christian Zionists are also hated for their missionary work. The country does not want to be evangelised. We Catholics testify through our pastoral and social work, through our charitable institutions, through our schools and universities. We can't do much more. But that does not rule out individual conversions.

Q) But still, the number of Catholics in Israel is growing. This is being driven more than anything else by guest workers from the Philippines and India.

A) That's correct. They are our brothers and we look after them. We help them with their consular and humanitarian problems. Often, for example, their residence status is uncertain. Around eight pastors are working with Catholic migrants. Admittedly, we cannot provide pastoral ministry in their native languages. But we manage with English. And because the children of Catholic migrants attend Israeli schools, the native language of the younger generation is Hebrew. We have already developed religious books for them. Naturally, we welcome this immigration. It shows that Christians will continue to inhabit the Holy Land in future, even though, unfortunately, many long-time Christian residents are moving away.

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