

Skidmore College

Creative Matter

MALS Final Projects, 1995-2019

MALS

3-1-2011

Consecrated Community, Sacred Spaces and National Indifference: Religious Identity as a Survival Tool for Palestinian Orthodox Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories

Ashley Lackovich
Skidmore College

Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lackovich, Ashley, "Consecrated Community, Sacred Spaces and National Indifference: Religious Identity as a Survival Tool for Palestinian Orthodox Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories" (2011). *MALS Final Projects, 1995-2019*. 79.
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol/79

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the MALS at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in MALS Final Projects, 1995-2019 by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact dseiler@skidmore.edu.

Consecrated Community, Sacred Spaces and National Indifference:

Religious Identity as a Survival Tool for Palestinian Orthodox
Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories

by

Ashley Lackovich

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

OCTOBER 29, 2010

Advisors: Katherine Graney, James Chansky

**THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN LIBERAL STUDIES
SKIDMORE COLLEGE**

Table of Contents

I.	Abstract	Page 1
II.	Introduction: Palestinian Orthodox Christians	Page 2
III.	Qualitative Research Theory	Page 8
IV.	Social and Minority Identity	Page 11
V.	National and Sacred Identity	Page 15
VI.	Between the Jews and the Muslims: Modern History of Palestinian Orthodox	Page 17
VII.	A Sacred Identity in Time and Place	Page 23
VIII.	Indigenous Voices: Interviews of Palestinian Orthodox Christians	Page 25
IX.	Reflections and Conclusion	Page 50

Abstract

This paper examines Palestinian Orthodox Christian identity as shaped by recent historic and contemporary circumstances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the paper is based upon interviews with Palestinian Christians, I utilize scholarship to support the ways in which the sacred historic narrative, as revealed by the interviewees, influences their collective understanding of self. The Palestinian Orthodox relationship with Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims and other Palestinian Christians is taken into account in order to reveal how they use their sacred identity to construct a social role for themselves that allows them to make sense of their status as a persecuted minority.

Introduction: Palestinian Orthodox Christians

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is commonly considered a religious-oriented ethnic dispute between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Muslims. The various minority groups, such as the Palestinian Christians, the Palestinian Bedouins and the Israeli Druze, are considered too small in number to play a role of any significance and thus are largely ignored by the international community. The Palestinian Christians, however, are not ignored internally, as their history is marked by a turbulent relationship with both the Jewish Israelis and the Muslim Palestinians. Religiously indigenous to Jerusalem, the Palestinian Orthodox represent the descendents of the original Christian community from which all Christian denominations emerged. Despite this historic distinction, their numbers are in rapid decline and their future is becoming increasingly uncertain. Now seen as the “ethnic other” by the Israeli Jews and as the “religious other” by the Palestinian Muslims, the existence of the Palestinian Orthodox in their religious homeland is threatened by a conflict that continues to alienate them from both major groups.

Historically, the Palestinian Orthodox play a notable role in what is today Israel and the Palestinian territories. The scholar Daphne Tsimhoni verifies their substantial demographic presence in her article, “Demographic Trends of the Christian Population in Jerusalem and the West Bank 1948-1978.” Using British censuses as her basis, she confirms the number of Christians by gathering information from local government offices, churches and community leaders. Consequently, she estimates that, in 1944, indigenous Christians comprised 6% of the overall population of what are today Israel and the Palestinian territories, excluding Jerusalem (58). Furthermore, she estimates that the Christian population of Jerusalem was 48.9% and thus constituted the majority over Jews, Palestinian

Muslims, Armenians and other ethnic and religious groups (55). Furthermore, Palestinian Orthodox were generally members of the educated class and thus, despite their minority status, often held leadership positions (61-63).

Despite this initial stronghold, the number of Palestinian Christians in this region has been in rapid decline since the establishment of the nation state of Israel in 1948. Given their education and subsequent economic security and social status, Palestinian Orthodox often possessed the resources necessary to leave the conflicted area. Furthermore, the British Government, wishing to protect the indigenous Christian minority, facilitated their evacuation both during and after the British Mandate. Tsimhoni writes that by the end of 1948, “the emigrant [Palestinian Christian] communities had already outnumbered their mother communities” (Demographics 56). According to census reports, there were, for instance, 29,350 Christians in Jerusalem in 1944; in 1961, that number had been reduced to 10,982 (57). In 1967, the Christians had declined to 15.8% of the overall population of Jerusalem and 5.1% of the inhabitants of the West Bank (61). By 1978, that number had dropped to 9.8% of Jerusalem residents and 4.2% of those on the West Bank (61). The 2007 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reports that there were 51,710 Palestinian Christians living on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, making them 1.37% of the total overall population at the time of the report.

The demographic decline of Palestinian Christians reveals the effect of this long-standing conflict on minorities. While the conflict has placed an equally significant strain on other Christian communities living in what is now Israel and the Palestinians, such as the Syrians, Armenians and Ethiopians, the fact that the Palestinian Christians are historically indigenous to Jerusalem often results in increased interest. Scholars in various fields, such as

cultural studies, anthropology and political science, study their disappearance and Christian church leaders often reference their minority status. Despite these inquiries, few scholars investigate how the remaining Christians maintain their identity in an ethnic conflict that marks them as either the “religious” or “ethnic other” among both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. Furthermore, the scholars rely heavily on academic information and only selectively use qualitative research, thus overlooking the importance of the Palestinian Christian narrative itself.

I spent two and a half years in Jerusalem from 2007-2009. I worked in various towns on the West Bank with local nonprofit organizations in conflict resolution, gender equality and education programs among Palestinian Muslims and Christians. During my time there, I became interested in the Palestinian Orthodox Christians. Unlike the Roman Catholic and Protestant Palestinians, the Palestinian Orthodox trace their origins back to the original Christian community. Since Catholicism and Protestantism in the Middle East result from modern conversion, historically mostly all Palestinian Christians were once Orthodox. Furthermore, I learned that, although they may call themselves Catholic or Protestant, they generally still celebrate Orthodox Christian religious festivals and holidays, and thus the Orthodox’s influence on other denominations adds to their intrigue. To learn more about these descendents of original Christianity, I read books, scholarly journals, newspaper and magazine articles and even pieces from various Christian churches; however, I began to sense a tension between that which I read and the information I acquired directly from the Palestinian Orthodox themselves. As I sought feedback on my potential project, one Orthodox Palestinian, who I would later go on to interview, confessed, “those academics, they interview us and then chop up our words to fit their theory. If you want to know about

us, stop pulling apart what we say and just listen.” The more I researched and read, the more contradictions I encountered. As a result, I decided to shape my final project according to the accounts the Palestinian Orthodox give themselves rather than molding their accounts to my own thesis.

Since my focus remains on the subjective Palestinian Orthodox Christian narrative itself, I used an emic ethnographic approach, centering my research on interviews of Palestinian Christians. The scholar Robert Feleppa writes in his article, “Emics, Etics and Social Objectivity,” that “emic notions are those about which the subject is the final arbiter and which are such as *must* be determined by elicitation” (246). While the identity of the Palestinian Orthodox is best described by the Palestinian Orthodox themselves, I recognize that the simple act of inquiring about their identity influences their answers. Feleppa attests that, “it is imposition to ‘purify’ even the emic composition of *all* forms of imposition” (244). This type of study does indeed have limitations in that the interviews were all solicited; however, scholars and journalists alike use qualitative, emic research to take a step closer to untainted indigenous narratives. Although first-person, observer-based accounts do have a place in any type of social study, I want to contribute to the discourse that creates a space for the indigenous, albeit solicited, voices themselves.

I began by interviewing nine Palestinian Orthodox Christians from Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. All interviews took place between October, 2009 and December, 2009. The interviews are quite extensive, as the interviewees embraced the opportunity to speak freely about their situation as a minority in one of the world’s most heated conflicts. All of the interviews began in person, even though three interviewees preferred to provide written answers to the questions for either reasons relating to privacy or language ability.

Two of the interviewees elaborated upon our conversation through email while another called to provide further reflections. It is important to note the interviewees are individuals with unique perspectives and opinions; thus, their views do not necessarily reflect a homogenous ethnic religious group. However, taken together, one can see the common collective identity they created as Palestinian Orthodox Christians living in what they consider to be the Holy Land. The overwhelming majority of these Christians are not actively practicing their religion in the sense that they do not follow all the teachings of the Orthodox Church (they do not attend Liturgy regularly, they do not keep religious fasts, they are not knowledgeable of the specific teachings of their church, etc). Consequently, their religious identity has evolved to function primarily as a social identity and a survival tool for a group caught between two religious opponents. Despite this religious secularization, these Palestinians attest that, unlike the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian Orthodox who has emigrated, they feel obligated to remain in this region in order to preserve their heritage as descendents of the original Christians. Although attestation was common among those I surveyed, the interviews are clearly not indicative of each and every individual belief; however, in the entire course of my time in Israel and the Palestinian territories, I can only recall one account when a Palestinian Orthodox Christian contradicted this widespread social conviction.

It is important to note the sensitivity of this topic. The interviewees disclosed information about both Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians; thus, the information they revealed could place them in uncomfortable, and quite possibly dangerous, situations. As a result, the biographical information I disclose is limited to the information each individual has permitted me to use. In some cases the biography is more extensive, being composed of an occupation, a town of residence and other relevant details. In other cases, the permitted

information remains vague. In no case will I use real names, as none of the interviewees were comfortable disclosing their personal identity. In five of the cases, I was able to receive a statement of release from the participants. The others told me that, if they signed the paper, they would not be able to disclose the truth, as they feared that an official statement could place them in a vulnerable position. These people confided in me as someone who had worked among them, and thus these interviews represent a relationship of trust. Any gaps of information reflect my commitment to honor the confidence they placed in me.

I will begin this project by presenting qualitative research and identity theories. I developed my understanding of Palestinian Orthodox identity from my own experiences among Palestinians and from the project interviews; however, my definition is grounded in academic theory. After this basic theory is established, I will delve into the specific case of the Palestinian Orthodox Christians. In addition to the previous scholarly ideas, here I will elaborate on my understanding of identity by incorporating works specific to the case of Palestinians and Palestinian Christians into my study. Although some of my research is derived from the work Palestinian-American scholar Rashid Khalidi, I make use of works from Israeli, European and North American scholars as well. This diversity demonstrates that my understanding of Palestinian identity is affirmed by both those with a vested interest in the subject and those who are able to view the topic with more distance. Within this section, I will discuss the current situation of the Palestinian Orthodox, as their existing circumstances shape and sustain their collective understanding of themselves. At the completion of this section, I will encapsulate my understanding of Palestinian Orthodox Christian identity. Then, I will then present the interviews. I have decided to place the interviews separate from the scholarly text in an attempt to avoid, so far as it is possible,

what the interviewees would consider the academic manipulation of testimony. Ultimately, the interviews speak for themselves. Due to space constraints, I will not include all of the interviews in their entirety in this project; however, I do have them on file for reference. Following the interviews, I will conclude with a brief section on my reflections.

Despite marginalization in both Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim societies, widespread poverty on the West Bank and among Arab Israelis, repeated internal displacement and the reduction of their status to a small and overlooked minority, Palestinian Orthodox survive in the land of their religious origins. Facing unprecedented social, political, demographic and economic challenges, they use their sacred identity to construct a social role for themselves that allows them to make sense of their status as a persecuted minority. They credit this role to their survival among Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews. As a result, I would like argue that the Palestinian Orthodox Christians' conception of their collective identity is centered upon their understanding of themselves as the last link to the original Christian Church, and it is this sacred conception that allows their survival as a religious minority with no true allies.

Qualitative Research Theory

I approach this study of Palestinian Orthodox Christian identity through qualitative research, specifically, through interviews. My choice to interview Palestinian Orthodox is firmly grounded in precedent and theory; interviews provide the most appropriate way of answering the questions I am pursuing.

Qualitative research, traditionally used in the social sciences to acquire a better understanding of human behavior, does not seek to gather measurable information, but rather

to understand reasoning, perspectives, opinions and experiences. This type of research often is problematized by the role of the researcher, who, it is argued, will either influence the human subjects by the mere act of questioning, or bring an overall bias to the research through his/her inherently subjective selection of subjects. John Gerring and Jason Seawright address these issues in the article, “Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options.” They respond to these criticisms by presenting numerous influence-mitigation strategies, including diverse case representation. While the nature of qualitative research, and particularly interview research, limits the numbers of participants, intended variations within the subject pool can help to alleviate influence on the individuals as well as the case as a whole. By incorporating subject diversity, based upon a differentiating breaking point that corresponds to categorical differences among the subjects (i.e. diversity of location, of age, religious affiliation, etc.), into the study, the distorting effect of the researcher is reduced. Gerring and Seawright write that “encompassing a full range of variation is likely to enhance the representativeness of the sample of cases” and also achieve a “maximum variance among relevant dimensions” (301). Thus, the researcher identifies the distinguishing marking point as well as the cases to be chosen; however, the nature of diversity is to mitigate the influence of the researcher on the study.

In my study of the Palestinian Orthodox Christians, I incorporate diversity by choosing my interview subjects based mainly upon the variable of location. Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza strip remain a major differentiating factor in the experience of Palestinian Christians. Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, for instance, can travel throughout both Israel and the West Bank, whereas those in the West Bank and Gaza are

limited to their respective political entities. Furthermore, Palestinian Christians in Israel are a minority within a minority, as, according to the CIA World Factbook 2010, Jews constitute 75.5 % of the population, Muslims 16.8% and the Christians only 2.1%. On the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian Christians are not situated among a Jewish majority, but rather among a Muslim mainstream. Furthermore, the Palestinian Christian experience in Gaza is marked not only by the smallest minority status of the three groups (according to the CIA World Factbook 2010, the Christians constitute 0.7% of the overall population in Gaza), but by recent war, overwhelming poverty and a radical regime based on Islamic law. In addition to location diversity, I include a range of ages among male and female subjects. While these variances strengthen my qualitative approach to research, they also strengthen the outcomes of the study. Seawright and Gerring write that “diversity may also be understood in terms of various casual paths, running from exogenous factors to a particular outcome. Perhaps three different independents (X1, X2, X3) all cause Y, but they do so independently of each other” (300). Thus, the collective social identity of the Palestinian Orthodox is revealed to be independent from location, sex or generation.

The scholars Lawrence W. Sherman and Heather Stray argue in their article, “Experimental Ethnography: The Marriage of Qualitative and Quantitative Research” that qualitative research could and should be used as a data collection form complementary to quantitative research, as qualitative research can answer questions that quantitative research cannot. They write that “while a quantitative analysis could examine differences in demographic characters, health or crime outcomes, and other officially recorded variables, it would not be possible to use such records to tap into emotions and life experiences” (217). They further argue that there need not be a tension between the two types of research, as one

complements the other. They note that during the 1960s “War on Poverty” quantitative and qualitative methods were combined for the first time for use in project evaluations. While the success of a Head Start program, for instance, could be measured by quantitative results (how many children served, for how long, etc.) the emotional effects on the family could not be assessed through the data. These results could be assumed (i.e. parents are happy that their children attend pre-school); however, such an assumption would oppose the very principles of factual analysis. Thus, quantitative research can provide a basis of understanding, whereas qualitative research can serve to explain the intangible outcomes behind the facts. Furthermore, quantitative research allows for greater freedom in qualitative research. Sherman and Stray write that “the sampling frame and the universe are identical for experimental ethnography, a truly rare opportunity for ethnography to be based on systematic sampling methods” (215). Qualitative research, then, serves to establish the validity of the quantitative, as it elaborates upon and explains the representative and measured quantitative indicators.

Social and Minority Identity

Palestinian Orthodox Christian social identity is multifaceted. Although identity evolves out of history, it is simultaneously suspended in time and place. Identity, as a product of its respective historic experience, maintains acquired traits and resists assimilating into current circumstance. Yet identity, as a continuously evolving notion, responds to, and is shaped by, current circumstances. Identity’s response to time and place, then, builds upon its historic experience. The Palestinian Orthodox find themselves in the middle of a religious-oriented ethnic conflict in which they, as a diminishing minority that is aligned with

neither the Israeli Jews nor Palestinian Muslims, have no clearly defined role. Their identity remains rooted in the beginnings of Christianity; however, it is also shaped by their current circumstances.

Individual and group understanding of identity changes according to social, political and economic situations. Conception of group identity, which is understood as either social or cultural identity, is commonly considered to be a reflection of the norms, values, beliefs and behaviors of one specific group vis-à-vis another. The scholar Stephen Reicher expands upon this concept in his article, "The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance and Change." He writes that subjects adopt a "social identification" that develops on "comparative terms" according to the specific circumstance of the group (929). Reicher continues that "theories that presuppose certain categories and categorical relations as the basis of human action are quite literally useless," as the social identity is a response to the specific situation grounded in time and place and cannot be understood in the abstract (941).

The scholar Jimmy M. Senders also addresses this concept of social identity vis-à-vis specific time and place in his article, "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies." Senders deals with ethnic identity and his work is applicable in that Palestinian Orthodox identity is intrinsically linked with ethnicity, as it is the ethnic component of their identity that conceptualizes the group as the descendants of the original gentile Christians. In other words, the Russian Orthodox may share the same religion; however, they do not share the same ethnic tie to the Palestinian ancestors. Senders writes that such identities are "situational and subjective" and also "fluid across time and social contexts" (329). Thus, group identity is not static, but rather is shaped by the current situation and subject to change. Palestinian Orthodox social identity, then, should not be viewed as stagnant, but rather as a

unique response to the circumstances of their specific here and now. Their social identity today cannot be evaluated, for instance, in terms of their collective understanding of self ten years ago, let alone during the Ottoman Empire. Although a group may retain a certain understanding of the collective self for a period of time, this understanding, however short or long lived, can be considered neither permanent nor completely unaffected by surroundings. Thus, “social action must be understood in its social context” (Reicher 921). For the case of the Palestinian Orthodox, they embrace an identity developed to preserve an enduring heritage; however, at the same time, their social identity cannot be viewed in isolation from the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Both Reicher and Senders fail to address issues of minority identity. The Palestinian Orthodox, who constitute a minority in virtually every town in which they live, cannot be viewed as divorced from this context. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd explain social identity vis-à-vis minorities in the article, “Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What is to be Done?.” These two scholars agree that social identity is specific to the circumstance of the respective time and place; however, as a minority, the group is creating an identity not only as a reaction to circumstance, but as an actual means of survival. They write that minorities construct “solidarities in the form of similarities” in order to form their own imagined community within the dominant social structure that, whether deliberately or unintentionally, marginalizes and/or completely excludes them (9). Thus the minority group fosters its own distinct collective culture, forming its own beliefs, norms and values, in order to create a sense of group legitimacy in a place where the minority receives neither recognition nor support from the majority.

The scholar Judith A. Howard elaborates upon this concept of creating social legitimacy in her article, “Social Psychology of Identities.” She writes that a minority “does not lend to identification unless the in-group-out-group categorization is situationally meaningful” (369). For the Palestinian Orthodox, their distinct collective culture is derived from their religious heritage; however, it is the modern conflict, in which they possess neither social nor political agency, from which they derive legitimacy. Living amidst a battle between Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians, the Orthodox believe that they must remain in what they consider their Holy Land in order to sustain a living link to original Christianity and, subsequently, maintain their Holy Sites. One interviewee confessed the dire need to remain in the land of their religious origins. He said that if all of Palestinian Orthodox left, “the churches—what are they going to do then, as museums?” (Joseph). Thus, collective beliefs of minorities are “not a mere superstructure,” but rather “the physical survival of the minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture as viable” (JanMohamend 6).

JanMohamend and Lloyd express concern over the interpretation of minority discourse. The overwhelming majority of scholars, they argue, approach the study of the minority group from a distanced, outside perspective. As a result, the perspective, as external, is limited. Furthermore, this academic distance is compounded by the inherent perspective of a dominant, and not minority, culture. They write that these scholars of minorities “are always in danger of reproducing the dominant ideology in reinterpretations” (9). Furthermore, the representatives of the minority group are also in danger of misrepresenting their own group. Indigenous scholars, writers and other public figures most likely obtained recognition because they gained advantages by means of yielding to the dominant group. They write that such representatives are isolated from their own group “by

virtue of the relative privilege offered by educational institutions as part of hegemonizing function” (11). Consequently, the scholarly information, whether from a member or non-member of the group in question, is liable to be flawed in its interpretation of the social identity. The autobiographical books and writings by Palestinian Christians of privilege, then, risk authenticity by having potentially tailored to the dominant culture. JanMohamed and Lloyd propose a solution by giving agency to the average members of the group, as they are the living bearers of the social identity who, unlike those of privilege, cannot escape the circumstance of time and place. In the Palestinian case, most writers describe the Palestinian experience from the comfort of the Diaspora. Edward Said, for instance, struggled against writing from the voice of privilege; however, the mere fact that he possessed political freedom separated him from those living as minorities amidst the actual conflict. Giving agency to the average members, then, only facilitates understanding of their situation among non-group members.

National and Sacred Identity

As vital as social and minority identity is in understanding Palestinian Orthodox Christian identity, the concept of sacred identity also plays a vital role. Sacred identity is defined by scholar Anthony D. Smith in his book, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*, as a social relationship vis-à-vis “religious beliefs, symbols, rituals and assumptions” (5). Not every group possesses a sacred identity in the sense that it is connected with traditional religious beliefs, as traditional sacred identity can be supplanted by other means of fulfillment. The Palestinian Orthodox Christians, however, base their historic narrative on the creation of their group at the founding of Christianity over 2,000

years ago. Since the Palestinian Orthodox rely on this historic narrative as the foundation of their social identity, theory of sacred identity is essential in understanding this group in the current time and place.

Smith argues that the key elements in any sacred foundation are “community, territory, history and destiny” (40). The Palestinian Orthodox share an ethnic community in that they maintain a belief in shared ancestry that they trace to the biblical gentile followers of Jesus. Their territory can be defined in terms of their collective property and spaces, all of which are somehow connected to their sacred foundation. For instance, their Holy Sites and churches constitute their territory in lieu of secular property, and they believe in both a shared past and shared destiny as the descendents of the original Christians. As will be made clear by the interviews, the Palestinian Orthodox believe that they, as a group, have always and will always have the unique privilege, albeit a distinction shrouded with challenges, of maintaining the sacred territory where Christianity began. As Smith writes, they see this as an honor: “it is not an act of imposition by and submission to God, but rather one of offer and acceptance” (51).

Smith does not necessarily equate national identity with a defined nation state, but rather with a community of people who constitute a nation. He defines nation, then, as “a named human population occupying a historic territory and sharing common myths and memories, a public culture, and common laws and customs for all members” (24). The Palestinian Orthodox Christians, who possess all of these traits, constitute a nation within the nation state of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Their national identity is not necessarily bound to Palestinian Liberation and the concept of a Palestinian nation state, but rather is focused on their sacred community. Their nation is based on their religious foundation,

which “distinguishes the sacred from the profane and unites its adherents in a single moral community of the faithful” (26). Palestinian Orthodox social identity is based on the sacred foundation of their nation, although they know that their nation will never gain political recognition.

Between the Jews and the Muslims: Modern History of Palestinian Orthodox

Palestinian Orthodox Christians have exhausted their faith in both a Muslim Palestinian and Jewish Israeli nation state. Since 1948, their loyalties have wavered, at times favoring Israel and at times a Palestinian solution. After being betrayed by both sides, Palestinian Christians have relinquished alliances in favor of sustaining a subculture that is based around their own group identity. These recent events have laid the basis for contemporary Palestinian Orthodox social identity.

Under the British Mandate, and thus prior to the establishment of the nation state of Israel in 1948, Jews, Muslims and Christians comprised one society. The scholar Daphne Tsimhoni explains that, since the expansion era of the Empire, the Ottomans established millets, officially protected, non-Muslim communities. She writes that three groups were recognized through this status: the Palestinian Orthodox Christians, the Armenian Orthodox Christians and the Jews (Status 167). The protection of these groups waned with time and was nearly nonexistent by the fall of the Empire; however, the British Mandate reestablished the significance of these three millets and granted them autonomous rights in areas such as marriage, wills, inheritance, and governance of their respective Holy Places (168). Thus, under the Mandate, the Palestinian Orthodox were differentiated from the Palestinian Muslims and placed alongside the Jews as a religious minority. As a result, Christians and

Jews came to suffer joint discrimination (182). These two minorities clustered in the cities and thus, together, they were able to form the majority over Palestinian Muslims in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tiberias (182).

Through the shared millet status, the Jews and the Christians began to not only coexist, but work together (182). The scholar Tamir Goren of Bar-Illan University writes that, even among the excitement of the growing movements of political Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, the local government of Haifa actively worked against ethnic/religious division, for “the good of the city required true cooperation between Jews and Arabs” (7). Furthermore, Edward Said recalls that even predominant Jewish thinkers in Palestine, including the philosopher Martin Buber who advocated for religious existentialism, “argued and agitated for a binational state” (5). Buber, in fact, did not live in a Jewish settlement, but rather in Talbiya, a Palestinian Christian area of Jerusalem.

The coexistence among the Christians and the Jews was short lived, lasting only until the United Nations adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. At that time, Palestinians were removed from their villages “by Zionist paramilitary forces” if those villages were located within the Jewish sector (Nassar 71). Furthermore, many Palestinians left voluntarily, as war was imminent. When war did occur, 700,000 Palestinians were either internally displaced or became refugees in neighboring Jordan. Both Palestinian Christians and Muslims, then, came to represent the ethnic other for the Israelis, regardless of the religious difference. Nassar writes that, consequently, “in the process of confronting and rejecting Zionism, the sense of Palestinian identity was further enhanced” (70). Palestinian Christians aligned themselves with the Muslims, as the Israelis were identified as the cause of their mutual trauma. This experience of internal displacement, known to Palestinians as

al-Nakba (the Catastrophe), was “a trauma that transcended the individual sphere and moved into a primordial national dimension,” as the scale of physical destruction and psychological damage was felt collectively (70).

This loyalty toward a collective Palestinian cause remained until 1966, when Israel adopted a new policy toward the Palestinian Christians. Israel, wishing to prevent both the consolidation of a Muslim-Christian coalition and a Christian uprising, began to develop friendly relations with church and social leaders. Michael Dumper notes in his article, “The Christian Churches of Jerusalem in the Post-Oslo Period,” that, since Israel ultimately controlled the region, the Palestinian Christians “felt compelled to acquiesce in or compromise with these policies so as to secure administrative and culture issues” (53). In this process, Israel and the Orthodox Church developed a relationship of trust and mutual respect until 1977, when Israel gained dominance of East Jerusalem. Although they did not break their relationship, a tension built until 1990, when Israeli-government supported settlers seized St. John’s Hospice in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Orthodox Palestinians saw this move as a direct act of provocation against them, as the Hospice was run directly by their church and community (53). In addition, the Christian Quarter of the Old City is the historic residence of the Orthodox Palestinians, as they live in the homes surrounding their most sacred site, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This site is not only believed to be the burial site of Jesus, but is attached the Church of St. James, the first church that is believed to have been established by the original Palestinian Christians. Thus, the Palestinian Orthodox equated confiscation of property in the Christian Quarter with the physical and spiritual dismantling of the sacred nation. Their reaction was so severe that the Orthodox Patriarch, who traditionally does not interfere with conflicts of a political

nature, joined the public protests. Dumper writes that at one point, “scuffles led to the patriarch being flung to the ground and Israeli police spraying the demonstrators with tear gas” (54). The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was closed for 24 hours in response, marking the first time that this site was closed in 800 years. Dumper writes that if the Christians were apprehensive about a “Muslim-dominated Palestinian State, the St. John’s Hospice incident suggested that it could be worse” (54).

At this point, the Orthodox Palestinians tended to again support a Palestinian nation state; however, the establishment of Hamas in 1987 produced feelings of distrust in a Muslim-dominated society. Hamas derived from the pan-Islamic Brotherhood Movement and “sought to address Palestinian nationalist aspirations and grievances from an Islam perspective” (Herzog 84). According to its covenant, Hamas equates the conflict with Israel in religious terms, as Palestine is considered “an Islamic *waqf*, endowment” (84). The scholar Glenn Bowman writes in his article, “Nationalizing the Sacred: Shrines and Shifting Identities in the Israeli-Occupied Territories,” that “Hamas’ Islam proposes to make the political and religious coterminous through an extension of a politico-theological discipline into all domains of life” (451). This religious imposition on the social is problematic when the imagined community is not homogeneous. A Muslim dominated society, then, becomes a sacred society in which the Palestinian Christians are not seen as fellow Palestinians, but rather as the religious other whose existence threatens the foundation of the nation.

At this same time, the Palestinian Orthodox Christians began to feel detached not only from Palestinian Muslims, but from other Palestinian Christians who had embraced western denominations. During the seizure of the Hospice, US fundamentalist Christians of various protestant denominations, along with groups of mainstream protestant Christians,

voiced clear support for Israel (Dumper 54). As a result, Palestinian Orthodox lost trust in their family and friends who had left Orthodoxy for any protestant church. Three years later, when the Vatican established formal relations with Israel, the Orthodox developed a similar distrust for Catholic Palestinians. As with the protestant support of Israel, the Orthodox viewed this alignment as “a dangerous breaking of ranks” (56).

The second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) took place from 2000 to approximately 2004. This active conflict occurred on the West Bank, most notably in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is home to Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity, the area believed to be the birthplace of Jesus. A Holy Site kept primarily by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, local Palestinian Orthodox consider this to be one of their formative sacred spaces. Charles M. Sennott writes in his book, *The Body and the Blood: The Middle East's Vanishing Christians and the Possibility for Peace*, that the Christian community, who collectively avoided any engagement in the conflict, were exploited by both the Muslim Palestinians and the Jewish Israelis. He writes that the Muslim Palestinians led the Israeli soldiers to Manger Square, as these Palestinians believed that “the Israelis were more conscious of negative public opinion in the Western world when neighborhoods with Christian churches were in the Israeli troops' crosshair” (xiii). The Israelis, however conscious they were of not targeting Christians and their churches, slipped into the trap of seizing the Church of the Nativity, as several wanted Muslim Palestinians had hidden inside (xv). Fighting moved inside of the Church, with Israeli snipers aiming into the Church and Palestinians shooting from the rooftop. Sennott writes that “their sacred space had been violated by both sides- by the Israeli military and by the Palestinian militias. . . the seize made starkly clear just how imperiled the Christian community felt” (xviii). As a result of

this event, the Orthodox Palestinians became even more distrustful of both sides and thus more dependent upon their own community.

Within the Palestinian territories, the Palestinian Orthodox clearly constitute a separate group; however, in the international community this autonomy goes unrecognized. The scholar Rashid Khalidi writes in his book, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, that the international community groups all Palestinians together and questions their collective identity. He writes that “the quintessential Palestinian experience. . . takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint,” at any place where papers and passports are necessary and “where identities are checked and verified” (1). Regardless of their destination, the Palestinians, the majority of whom possess no passport, undergo questioning not only regarding their origins, but their work, their family and social circles, and their everyday life. This situation is not reserved for Palestinian elite who travel abroad, but remains part of everyday life at Israeli check points within the Palestinian territories. The Israeli government is aware of the Palestinian Christians and the corresponding social and political differences between their group and the Palestinians Muslims; however, all Palestinians must cross the checkpoints. Khalidi writes that, “this condition of suspense in which Palestinians find themselves at borders means that as far as the world, or at least a large part of it, is concerned, the Palestinian’s identity remains in question” (4). Palestinian Orthodox are not recognized as distinct from Muslim Palestinians, but rather are grouped together with those from whom they are isolated, further perpetuating their marginalization through the denial of their existence as a separate, distinct group that does not consider itself an active player in the conflict.

A Sacred Identity in Time and Place

In response to this internal and external rejection of identity, the pull toward self-definition is embellished among all Palestinians. For the Palestinian Orthodox, religion is the differentiating internal factor; thus, religion simultaneously legitimizes the existence of the group while alienating it from the Palestinians as a whole. JanMohamed and Lloyd write that “the minority’s attempt to negate the prior hegemonic negation of itself is one of its most fundamental forms of affirmation” (10). In the article “Conflict, Identity, and Ethos: The Israeli-Palestinian Case,” Neta Oren, Daniel Bar-Tal and Ohad David explain that groups sustain their social identity by believing in their shared uniqueness. Of vital importance is the “perception that they [the respective group members] are similar individuals, who share the same notion of being members of society, whereas other individuals are different and therefore belong to other groups” (134). As a result, the social identity becomes of monumental importance.

The Palestinian Orthodox must not only account for their collective socio-religious difference, but they must also rationalize their reasons for remaining true to their community amidst turmoil and hardship. The need for such legitimacy is especially urgent in light of the fact that the overwhelming majority of Palestinian Orthodox has left the Holy Land since 1948. Sennott places the shrinking numbers in perspective. He writes that “in one Jerusalem parish, there were not enough young Christian men left to carry a casket at a funeral” (xxv). The focus on the sacred past as an integral part of their identity allows them to rationalize their existence by concentrating on an element that transcends reality, as sacred foundations “are perceived as standing above and apart from everyday concerns. . . the sacred past is also a cultural resource, for it inspires emulation and encourages virtue” (Smith 171). The

Palestinian Orthodox who remain in what they consider their Holy Land may be a small minority, however, they are held together by “the belief that the community is the historical product of the heroism . . . manifest in its illustrious past, of the spirit of its unique history” (205).

The Palestinian Orthodox harness their surroundings to support the basis of their social identity as their sacred origins. Bowman, in referring to the Palestinian Orthodox churches and holy places, notes that identity is “monumentalized on the landscape” (450). The Palestinian Orthodox are surrounded by tangible reminders of their religious heritage and “the holy place speaks for and of a community” (432). The sacred omnipresence serves not only as a reminder of the past, but functions as a prompter for current social identity in the specific time and place. Bowmann notes that the religious celebrations that bring the Palestinian Orthodox together in these places extend beyond religious meaning. He writes that “the time and place serves as a place of inscription” (438). Thus, in the middle of a religious conflict, the meaning of these holy places gains a collective social significance. The Palestinian Orthodox turn to their sacred origins and sustain themselves through the belief that they must survive the present situation because, as their surroundings remind them, they are the descendents of the original Christians. Smith writes of a “sacred communion,” a belief that a chosen people have a spiritual union with God that requires them to fulfill certain tasks (33). For the Palestinian Orthodox, their task is to maintain an active presence in the Holy Land. Their group currently believes that this conception of history, faith and purpose is “both universal and eternal” (Bowmann 438).

Palestinian Orthodox Christians maintain a collective social identity that is based upon their sacred understanding of their position in Israel and on the West Bank and Gaza

Strip. Their identity is shaped by their sacred surroundings. As a tiny, shrinking minority that has been betrayed by the Israeli Jews, Palestinian Muslims and western Christian churches, the Palestinian Orthodox have become socially self-sufficient. They no longer form alliances with other groups, but rather they concentrate on their perceived alliance to God. As the descendents of the original gentile Christians, they believe that they must preserve an indigenous Christian presence in their Holy Land. Their community constitutes a nation within a nation state and occupied territories, as they maintain their own beliefs, traditions and practices despite outside pressure. In the following interviews, the Palestinian Orthodox themselves will express that their collective sacred identity allows them to survive in the midst of a religious conflict that does not involve them and that shows no signs of an end.

Indigenous Voices: Interviews of Palestinian Orthodox Christians

After explaining the project to the interviewees, I provided questions that were meant to guide, though not dictate, the topics of discussion. I presented all of the questions before each person began to speak, and would only remind them of the questions if they drifted too far off topic. The questions are:

- Define the meaning of being a Palestinian Orthodox Christian. Is group membership by choice (i.e. can one become Palestinian Orthodox)? Is there something special one does (i.e. attend Liturgy, fasting, follow rules of the church, etc.) to be included as a Palestinian Orthodox? What is the emotional attachment to being Palestinian Orthodox (how important is it to you)?

- Describe the Palestinian Orthodox relationship to Palestinian Muslims, other Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews. How do you feel about these other groups? Do you believe these groups treat you differently because you are Palestinian Orthodox? If so, how do you respond to the treatment?
- Do you believe in a Palestinian nation state? Or in Israel? What is the place of the Orthodox in a future Palestine or as a part of Israel?
- How do you feel about your homeland? Do you want to stay, or would prefer to immigrate? Why/why not?

Ana, approximately 60 years old, married, 2 grown sons, resident of East Jerusalem

Ana, coming from a wealthy Palestinian family, studied in both the United States and Turkey. Her family lost their historic home to the Israelis in 1967. She holds a Jordanian passport and is a retired employee from an embassy of an English-speaking country. The interview took place in her home, a condo in a complex with only Christian families. In the winter, when the leaves are not on the trees, she can see the Wall separating East Jerusalem from the West Bank from her balcony. Upon her request, she provided the majority of her interview as a written document and expanded upon certain points via a telephone conversation.

Ana: “When I was in high school, I used to go to church every day at 5 am. Can you imagine? Nowadays, I still go on Sundays. There aren’t a lot of us who do; most of us just go for weddings and funerals, but that is not how I was brought up. You asked about being a Palestinian Christian. I want to reverse what you asked, for I want to say I am a Christian who happens to be a Palestinian, for there are Muslims and Jews who are Palestinians. We

are from the three religions were born during the British mandate and our birth certificate is written in Arabic, English and Hebrew. The young Israeli generation do not know this, they did not teach them at school that people were living in this part of the world before they occupied this land in the pretext that it was empty and that no one lived here, (we did not exist for them). My first cousin was born before 1948 war in Tel-Aviv. He went to the States, married an American and came [back] to see his dying mum. Anyway in his American passport was this, "Born in Tel-Aviv, Palestine." Well the security at the airport detained him for 4 hours, he had to explain to her [the airport security agent] that it was called as such, something she could not grasp or believe. Then he tried to explain that he was not a Muslim. I think he had a great time trying to give her a lesson in History, which horrified her. Poor thing, though, she only knows what she was taught and she was only doing what she was told.

But anyway, it is more important that I am a Christian than a Palestinian. You see, we are the original Christians who happened to be called Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Orthodox, now. But what is important is that our ancestors were the very first followers of Jesus. St. James Church was established by James, the brother of Jesus. This is what is important. We are carrying on something very special, our Christian traditions are passed down one by one by one from the very first days. And you know, before the Occupation we did not feel that there was a barrier between us as Christians, Muslims or Jews, but I have to admit that this feeling started to disappear during the first intifada. Muslims started being more fanatics, wore their long robes and covered their heads. At the school, no one had a cover on their heads, but now only one [Muslim girl] remains without the head cover, they all became so fanatic when the Khomeini came in Iran.

As to Jews, I can't tell you precisely there, the most fanatics are the settlers that come originally from the States from Brooklyn, we see them on the TV giving trouble to their police when forced to evacuate their illegal settlements, claiming that this land belongs to them. More and more we are surrounded by these fanatics so we have to remember who we are so we do not get swallowed up. To be a Palestinian Orthodox you are born one. We have to remember that this is our own birthright to be here at the Holy Places and we have to make sure that we don't disappear.

As for how they treat me, well none of them ever hurt me, but there are discriminations. When I hear something bad that they say, I remind both groups that it is our Holy Land, Christ was born, lived and died in this part of the world. No one likes to acknowledge that we are here, we are ignored here being the minorities as if we don't exist. Yet both [Muslims and Jews] cannot deny our presence at the Holy places. You walk in and it is all Orthodox. Come to St. James and see the descendents of the first Christians, praying at the same place! The other Christians here, it is the same thing. They can be Catholic or Protestant or whatever else, but they are not guarding the Tomb of Christ. Why are we guarding it? Because we have been guarding it since before the Resurrection. They [Palestinian Catholics and Protestants] pick up new traditions, but we keep what was given to our ancestors alive.

Moses was not able to come to this land because he disobeyed God, and according to the Muslims, Mohammad came here but then flew away in his sleep. But Christ was born here and he resurrected here. That is why we are here. If you think about that, it is funny that we are the minority, governed by Jews and Muslims. You know, we Christians aren't in a

race for power. We don't have more than 2 or 3 children while the Muslims have at least 10, so does the Orthodox Jews.

As for Palestine or Israel, it does not matter because we are the minority and no one wants us. We just have to ignore politics and concern on getting by. Just last week I was at the Israeli mall and a woman was there fundraising for little girl. Poor thing, I think she [the little girl] had cancer. So I gave the woman some money—you should have seen the look on her face. She said to me, 'but you are an Arab!' I said, 'I am a Christian.' She couldn't believe it because no one knows about us. See, a Muslim would never, ever do that today. We Orthodox are ready to live with anyone if only they would give us a chance.

And as for leaving this land, I think that since my ancestors and great grandfathers lived in this part of the world why should I leave. It does not matter that it is called Palestine or Israel, yet I have a right to live here, more than the people who come from abroad who kick people from their homes and claim that it belong to them. We Orthodox have always been here and we always have to be here.”

Sam, storeowner, East Jerusalem

Sam owns a small Christian-oriented souvenir shop in the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. His shop is about a three minute walk from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Sam spent over ten years in Australia and holds an Australian passport, but he chose to return to Jerusalem. The interview took place in his shop. The first part was recorded, but, given the loud background noise from the street, the second part was written down.

Sam: “About the Orthodox, what’s left here, we are maybe 1%. . . all, we are Christian, we believe God is everywhere here. . . I trust that God is everywhere, be nice to people, it is the only way and He looks after me, and that’s it. There is a discrimination, a big discrimination, the Christian here, we’re lost. The Orthodox. . . nobody care about you. . . All the time people leaving here because there is no jobs, no home, nothing, no future for them here. I’m one who came back from Australia because He wants me, God want me to be back here.

Here we have Tomb of Christ, Birthplace of Christ, many original churches. If everybody leave, who take care [of them]? That’s it, then finished Orthodox here! 2,000 years and then finished! Then what we say to God? No matter what, no matter what happens here we all die one day and then answer for our life. You see, our ancestors they were the ones, the ones who follow Jesus. Not follow Jesus like people follow today, but they were the original Christians. They knew him when he was in flesh. Imagine that! My ancestors knew him! And then they build churches and give to their children, not to strangers. And so this it is throughout all generations, this is what God want us to do. We have no choice, this is how we were born. The ones who leave, they leave for job, for money. They are tempted! I leave but then I knew I make a mistake because He want us here. Everyone wants our places. Pope, he want the Holy Land. Muslims, they want because we have and Israelis want for tourist. I go away and I know that I one less person to be here. We make promise to God and so I must come back.

I miss Australia. There every weekend I used to go dancing. Here no dancing. If we dance Muslims say that we not respect, not mourning the situation. Israelis say that we dance so happy because we have uprising. They talk like children. In Australia I can dance and

dance every night. I have friends there and we go together. Here if you are Orthodox you must be quiet. We live like mice, always hide, always be quiet, hope to eat crumbs and not be caught in trap.

So we do what we do and just leave the Jews and the Muslims alone. We have our rules, I mean, our own way to treat people. We know our right from wrong. We make no problems, never. Just be nice others and that's it, finished! We have an Orthodox club in Jerusalem and there we can go inside and have our own music and food and be together. You know, we had to build very big wall around with stones, you know, big stones, because the Muslims, when we gathered, the Muslims would throw rocks there. Now they cannot do so much because of our wall. But we still have to be careful.

Then the Israelis couple of years ago built the Wall, Separation Wall, they say. . .right by our club. Before Orthodox from on the West Bank come to our club but now they don't get pass. To leave the West Bank they need a permission and they can't get a permission. Some live five minutes only away but cannot come! Only Orthodox from Jerusalem can go now. The ones on the West Bank have no club and no money or permission to build so now they gather in houses only. It is not the same because you cannot have so many people like in a club. When we have solution to problems given by Muslims, we get new problems from Jews. If we have solution to problems from Jews, then again we get from Muslims. This is the life here for the Orthodox. When I say nobody care about you, this is what I mean. We are lost in the middle. . .

We nice to everyone, smile say hello, but we cannot trust anyone else. . . The Jews, the Orthodox ones, you see them walking through the Christian Quarter when they go to spent their Shabbat at the place where the Temple was. The only come here to remind us that

they in control because they can walk through Jewish Quarter [of the Old City] to get to Temple. They want, how you say, provoke us. The Muslims, they try to buy property here [in the Christian Quarter] so we leave. They want to break us up. About that, how I feel, I wish they just leave us alone. I want to be friends but to be friends you need two people to both want to be friends. I just be nice, pray to God, and He help me, finished! The situation is difficult, but as long as we stay and do like we are supposed to here in Holy Land, God, He take care of us.”

Zach, 27, Gaza City & Noor, 19, Gaza City

Zach works for an international charity in Gaza. He lives with his mother and three younger sisters. Noor is a first year university student who is studying computer technology. This interview took place in the small monastery next to the Orthodox Church in Gaza. The interview was recorded, as we were in a private, secluded and guarded place where there was no danger of anyone hearing our conversation.

Noor: “You know here in Gaza we live with Islam, um, but we are Christian here. Its mean we are with Jesus. . . we are. . . strong in faith. Yes, yes, we have faith.”

Zach: “I just want to add something which is very important to us as Christians who live in this territory by side of Israel. It’s the land of Jesus Christ and we are seeing by the time that Christians are fleeing or immigrating outside abroad whether to the Gulf, you know to Canada to Europe to America to the US to find good fortune or to work. So as Christians here in Gaza it’s really difficult, you know, to gather all together, to stay because we are still a minority and its really so difficult to live as the Christians outside. So we are struggling, we are trying, you know, to keep our faith, to live our among our brothers, among, you know,

majorities like Muslims. And to us, we will have to stay in this Holy Land because it's very important. We can't leave it, you know, as just the land of Jesus Christ without the Christians. So it's a must that we stay here. . . in the place of Jesus Christ."

Noor: "Like we know some Christians from here who got traveled outside. Maybe the life in the outside so better than here. Some freedom, some peace not happen here, yeah in here. Sometimes we can feel it, sad, bad. . ."

Zach: [regarding problems with the Muslim majority] "Let me talk about the girls. The girls for example they cannot go to any [public, government run] school because the custom in Gaza is that most of the girls must wear like a veil. . . full veil and such a custom in Gaza which is accepted by the majority and not by the minorities. So it is difficult when Christian girls want to go somewhere, I mean unveiled, when they cannot act free, they cannot feel free as a native person in his or her place. So this is really difficult for the Christian minority to act freely. This is about education and something related to the figures, something related to the custom in Gaza. But our people cannot come over [overcome] these problems. We can say, in short, we have used to it [we have gotten used to it] because it's our land and we have to exist in it. . ."

Noor: "We know we have some problems sometimes with Islamics. . .but how we can delete these things?"

Zach: "But because we have the role in Gaza that we have, I mean, if we all will leave, who's going to stay? But it is very difficult to stay on and keep on living this way. It's really very hard and this is a great and critical problem, a real danger that's facing our community."

Noor: “Sometimes I can feel Jewish so nice when in the Christmas or in the Easter because we have permission to sometimes travel [to the West Bank and Jerusalem]!”

Ashley: “Only the Christians, right, not the Muslims?”

Noor: “Yeah, but before a few months [during the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza war] I think they were so, so hard. . .”

Zach: “To me it seems to be that we are all the same. I mean, whether Christians or Muslims who live in Gaza spot. . . or the Jews or any others who live in Israel. So here, you know, politics play the major role. So no contact is allowed between Arabs, I mean [Arabs] in Gaza and others [non Arabs] from Israel. This is really important. Some years ago I attended some seminars with Jews. To me, personally, I don’t have any problems with Jews because all of us are human beings. What if I were a Jew?. . .They [both Palestinian Muslim and Israeli Jewish politicians] don’t want peace. If they want to have peace, I don’t think that any of us [Christians] are opposed to have a Jew as a friend.”

Zach: “As for dating boys and girls it’s, I don’t want to say it’s almost impossible, but it’s very rare. You know, if a boy wants to meet a girl he has to take her to a restaurant or somewhere else and if he go to open [public] restaurant he be criticized and this will effect reputation of a girl. . . this culture, this spot, if a boy wants to meet a girl it means he wants to get married to her. . .”

Noor: “Yes, it’s difficult to feel free. Why? Because the borders, it’s all closed. When it’s closed people stop being opened minded so to get very committed to religion, to the traditions, to such ideas. . .”

Zach: “Maybe guys have a little chance to talk to girls in the church. . .”

Noor: “Sure we can speak with any girl like sister. . .not in the other way . . .”

Zach: “Yeah, you can just speak ‘hello,’ ‘hello, how are you?’ No more. . .”

Noor: “You cannot understand her opinions. . .”

Zach: “This is living in an Islamic community. And it’s very difficult. . .”

Noor: “For example, yesterday I went with my sister to the supermarket. The person who takes the money in the supermarket says, ‘She your girlfriend! How you can pay for her??’ I told him, ‘It’s my sister, don’t worry.’ If you are girlfriend, it’s hard!”

Zach: “For Christian girls, it’s really very difficult sometimes to even cross the street without to cover her head.”

Ashley: “It must be especially hard being Christian and living under Islamic law.”

Zach: “Extremely. Extremely hard. That’s why so many, you know, prefers to go outside. They are now free.”

Nada and Selma, both in their 50es, East Jerusalem

Nada and Selma are sisters. They share their historic family home in the Christian Quarter of the Old City, approximately 5 minutes from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and St. James Church. Nada works for an Orthodox Christian charity on the West Bank, and Selma takes care of their home. They do not have passports, but they are official residents of Jerusalem and are thus permitted to enter and leave the West Bank. This interview took place in their home. Nada’s words were recorded, but Selma’s were transcribed, as she was not comfortable having any concrete evidence of our conversation.

Selma: “Nada goes to church every Sunday, but not like me. Me, I go once or twice a year. We can go to church, follow the teachings of church, fast and have icons, but that only makes us more, what do you say, devout. The truth is we are Palestinian Orthodox

Christians by being born one, there is no other way. It is something special and God chooses us, we cannot choose Him. I know in America you can change from one religion to another with no problem. Even here I know that a Christian can become a Muslim and I have heard of Christian marrying a Jew and then becoming Jewish. But with us, no. Yes someone can become Orthodox but that person can never be Palestinian Orthodox. You understand, it is not up to us. And if you leave, say an Orthodox marries a Muslim, then finished. She gave up her right. But that does not happen much at all.

And our identity, yes, well, it is connected to the Holy Land. And living as a minority, well, what can we do? We have to stay. And the Muslims and the Jews, well, what can we do? This is what we must do as Orthodox. This is what we must do as descendents of the first Christians. It is not burden, really, because nothing from God is a burden, but life in between these two not so easy.”

Ashley: “Do they [the other religious groups] treat you differently than they treat each other?”

Nada: “Yes. Yes, defiantly, yes. We live in different worlds. . . I have a friend close around here and her neighbors are all Muslims and their children are giving her lots of trouble. They stay out at night until 1 or 2 or 3 in the morning only to trouble them and bother them. They want them to move their house.”

Ashley: “Do you think this is because they are Christian?”

Nada: “Yes, that’s what they told them! With the Israelis we don’t have so many problems. Maybe because we don’t have so many here, except 2 families. . . Yes, here we have 2 families. And now they are moving here a lot, they are building 4 stories [4 story high buildings] and each story has, I think, 2 apartments, so you can imagine how many there

will be. But as long as we don't interfere with them they won't interfere, I don't know, no, they won't interfere. But we always, you know, the Christians are peace people.

The Palestinian problem. . .As a Christian I was very much loved Jerusalem and the Arabs and our hopes were, 1967 exactly, that in a few hours we will be at Tel Aviv and the 3rd day I heard soldiers here in the area, I was mad. I said, 'helas!' [enough], no more faith, no more hope in the Arab world since then because I had so high hopes. Helas, helas, finished."

Selma: "You see, during this time the Muslims were better with us. I was young girl but I can remember how kind they were, that we were never taught to have fear. But things changed and they were becoming fanatics. And then the Jews were kind, you know, I remember when they used to bow in respect to the Patriarch and offer to help make life easier for the Christians. They understood, you know, what we faced as Christian Palestinians with all Muslims everywhere around us. But then they turned fanatics too. New Jewish [people] started coming and going to West Bank with guns. What can we do? And other Palestinian Christians, why did they become Protestant and Catholic? Maybe because they received money or food, but that is not why you leave the church, you see. So, we are alone. But what can we do?"

Nada: "Ashley, the people, the Muslim people of Jerusalem. . . those who are well educated people and they are very polite and good people. But the fanatics and those who come from. . .I can't say not from villages even, the villagers are good because I have been working in villages, they are very good, from camps and those who are not educated they are the bad people. . . Today, for example, at New Gate. . .While I was talking with him [a neighbor] a lady passed from the Old City, she is Christian, because you know she wears different [clothing] than the Muslims ones. Two of the workers at New Gate was telling her

some bad words so he stopped talking with me and started quarrelling with them because he wants to kill them. . . and so those uneducated people are the bad people only.”

Selma: “You know, the Israelis, there are good ones too. Those that know who we are see that we live, how you say, that we live with people who don’t want us to be here. They see that we are peace people, people who don’t want to fight, just want to live. But it doesn’t matter. Really, Jews, Muslims, it doesn’t matter. Whoever is in control, it will never be us. We just want to be left alone. Our purpose, so much greater than politics. We guard the Tomb of Christ. That is worth everything.”

Dina, 20-25 years old, Bethlehem/Beit Jala

Dina’s interview was provided in written form.

Dina: “You know it is very difficult to live here if you are not a Muslim. Before, it was the Intifada and they were fighting right here in the streets. I was in Beit Jala and it is an Orthodox town. We want nothing to do with the tanks and guns and blood but this is where they fight, here all of the way [to] Bethlehem. I remember when it happened, I be on the floor and prayed and prayed that the bullets would pass. And we had a curfew and we could only go and get bread and milk for a couple hours a day. My legs shake so bad when I went only a few meters to the store because a Jew sees me as enemy because I am a Palestinian and a Muslim sees me as enemy because I am a Christian. Our only friends are our own people. It was very bad and we thought we had no chance between these two. There was so much hate and anger and we wanted no part [of the conflict] but they made us a part of it by fighting in our towns and in our churches.

Nowadays, well life in the West Bank is not so good. Before this area was all Christians but so many leave to America and then the refugees came and made camps around Bethlehem. Before Bethlehem was almost all Christian but today it is 60% Muslim. Now we [Christians] must be very careful where we go, how we dress, what we say, who we talk to. Even if we chew gum during Ramadan the Muslims scold us. But still we stay in Bethlehem because Bethlehem is the birth place of Christ. You've been to the Nativity Church, that is our place. We guard it with our life. When Intifada happened and the Muslims and the Jews fought there, I tell that the Orthodox inside that church would not leave. They would die first!

I can't go to Jerusalem because I don't have papers. One time I had the permission to go and see a doctor because there was no doctor in the West Bank who could help. Even though I had the permission the soldiers wouldn't let me pass. I hurt my back and they saw that I was not well but they did not care. They sent me home and knew I am not finding a doctor in the West Bank. Another time three years ago I did go to Jerusalem because it was Easter. Israelis let Christians go to Jerusalem for Easter. When they were sure I was not Muslim I think it was better or maybe they let me pass because they had orders to let all Orthodox pass. I don't know but I was very, very happy. Always on Christmas I am at the Nativity Church. For Easter I should go to Jerusalem but I can't every year. But I was so happy that one year because I got to be with the Jerusalem Orthodox at the Tomb of Christ on Easter. They [the Palestinian Orthodox in Jerusalem] were very welcoming. That was very special for me.

Believe me I want to leave this problem but I can't. My family is here and I see what happens when Christians leave. The churches become empty and the Muslims take them.

What if the Nativity Church would be empty? The Muslims would make a mosque, a great big mosque with great big speakers so that all of the city and country knows that now Bethlehem calls to Mohammed. To the Israelis you can maybe appeal and say, 'it is history. Maybe you don't believe, but it is history.' Maybe not but there is a chance. To the Muslims nowadays, there is no chance! Maybe before but not now. So if they got the church they would tear it [down] and make huge mosque. You see that is why we stay. As long as we are here, the church is here. This is our job.

I would like for there to be a state called Palestine but only if there is a place for Christians. You know we leave everybody else alone. We would like to be friendly with them but then they are suspicious of us and that is why we do [mind] our own business. But sometimes the Muslims cannot stand us because we are different. They want women to cover their heads and always stay home and not work. They want men to have beard and to bow to Mecca so many times a day even [though] we don't believe in Mohammed. The fanatics don't like jewelry or makeup or books or music and they are becoming more and more because of the situation. Orthodox, we respect people. They do what they do and that is OK but we do not want to do like them.

I am afraid of Israel. They block us in here [on the West Bank] and then they say they do not know why the Muslims become fanatics. No jobs, no homes, no food, no safety and it is natural for people go crazy. They [Muslims] cannot beat on the Jews because they are in power so they beat on us because we have no power. I am afraid of Palestine because the people here are not good anymore. I do not believe that they can turn back and become normal again. This is where we are in between the Jews and the Muslims. But I cannot

leave people here to suffer for Holy Land alone. If I leave, I would be so sad because of this that I would not enjoy my freedom.”

Joseph, early 60es, resident of East Jerusalem

Joseph is the Orthodox lay representative to the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. This is a prestigious lifelong position, and Joseph was elected by the Orthodox community in the fall, 2008. He represents the interests of the people, making sure that the Patriarchate is aware of the problems and challenges facing the shrinking minority. Joseph and I sat down in St. James Church, where his office is located, to talk. Our conversation focuses heavily on the current position of the Orthodox, as it is his job to convey their situation. He also addresses the Orthodox sacred historic narrative and the need for Orthodox to remain in the Holy Land. The entire interview was recorded.

Joseph: “Well, here our community, you know, before 1948, before the war started. . . they used to be 54,000 people, Orthodox, in Jerusalem just! Now in 1967 there have been about 18,000 people and now we have. . . between 3 and 4,000 what remain in Jerusalem. Most of them, they run away. . . the situation was not so good, as you see. . .and they don’t come back.

Now most of the community here. . .I have some ways to bring them some aids [humanitarian aid], you know, but every time I tell them don’t say who is [giving them the aid] because I don’t want troubles from other people. I am doing without the others know what I am doing so I have now about 120 families [who need assistance from the Patriarchate]. . .

The situation is very difficult because of the Jewish and the Muslims. . . the Christians, they have been in the Holy Land before the Muslims comes, you see, and the Jewish people, the Jewish people, they don't have any signs to show that this a Jewish country because most of these excavations. . .you see something from the Byzantines. . . so many excavations doesn't show anything from Israelite period. . .Here is many historical sites which shows the Byzantine period. . . And on the 12th century when the Crusaders, they captured the Holy Lands and when the Pope send them you see they captured the Church and they martyred some patriarchs and they martyred some monks, as we can see in the monastery of St. Sava, we can see many skeletons and skulls of these monks that have been killed by the Crusaders and then the Persians too.

Now you see the situation, I mean for the Orthodox people, it is also, as I told you before, it is difficult. We try now to give aid for the students not to go outside the country, but to remain in our country. . . because if you empty the city no Christians and the churches no people to pray in-- the churches, what are they going to do then, as museums? So this is what we are afraid, it is better to keep the people inside.

You know, as I told you here the Christians, you know, sometimes they have studied the Hebrew language so they can get a job with the Jews, but they don't give you [them] the same rights as they give for a Jew on this land, you see, because they say the Jewish people, they serve the army. . . “

Ashley: “Do you ever have any problems, then, with the Muslims?”

Joseph: “We try to keep everything as it is, you know, to make it more, to make more connections between Muslims and Christianity. . . but you know, the foreigners, as Muslims foreign people who are coming they make themselves very religious. They come from

outside. . .Pakistan. . .India. . .Afghanistan [previously] too. . . they used to come to make themselves that they are the persons who know the Islamic religion [and teach/influence the people]. They don't know anything, you know, they are just filled with, just with Islam, they don't have any idea about Christianity and they don't want to know. . .

Now I will tell you. . .who built the Arabian countries? The Christians, the Palestinians. When they got outside, you know, Palestine and became refugees, as in Jordan and Arabic countries, they built the things you know because they are well educated. . . Now you know it's very difficult to go and have a job in the Arabian countries, you have to have permission, now you have to go to the embassy down to get permission to go to enter that . . .country, you know, it's very difficult now. Here, this year, we have problems as, if we have Jordanian passport. . . [and if we] want to go to Syria you [we] need a special permission; you want to go to Lebanon you have to have a special permission. Now this year to Lebanon they didn't give any permission for Palestinian they [who] are coming from the Holy Land, I mean from the West Bank, to enter Lebanon. Just Syria, they give them to go to Syria. Now some of these trips they stopped because they cannot visit Lebanon because, you know, we have our relatives. I have a sister; I cannot visit her in Lebanon now. Father Issa [priest at St. James Church], you know, maybe on Tuesday he's going to [via] Jordan to Lebanon because he got two daughters married there. Always I have, you know, to give him something to send to my sister. Last year he was happy to know my sister there, to visit her. So this year also he is going- I send with him something to give to my sister there. You know they be happy to have something from the Holy Land.

You know before the war, before 1967, most of the [Palestinian] Orthodox people from Lebanon-- there is village, they call it Wadi Schakul. . . now all this village, they are

Orthodox people, no Catholics, no Maronites, just Orthodox people! Now on Easter time they used to be here [before 1967], in St, James, the whole week . . . and we used to have people coming from Syria. . . Damascus, you know they used to come also. And other Lebanese people, not just that village, you know, so many of them are now longing to come back to the Holy Lands. . . I know a woman, [now] an old woman, she was at the hospital at the American University at Beirut and you know she became blind, not seeing. . . The last time when she visited the professors there he told her, ‘no way we cannot do another operation.’ And so she told her parents, ‘please take me to the Holy Lands: I want to see the tomb of Jesus Christ.’ And in that year [1966], when she came, she told them, ‘I need a place in the front to see the light, to see the light.’ The other people, they say, ‘she is blind! How she is going to see the light?’ You know and then on the Holy Saturday of the Fire, when the fire comes out, she used to see. When she go back to her professor, he astonished what happened with her and she told him, ‘I visited the tomb of Jesus Christ and Christ gave me the light to see.’ And she promised to come three years after that, to come to the Holy Lands every year for three years. She came the first year in 1966; in 1967 she couldn’t come because the war happened.

[Regarding why so many Christians have left] When you see your house is taken by your ‘enemy,’ as we say, you cannot get your properties back. You know once my father, we used to have a house in Katamon in, where St. Sava monastery [is]. And we have a piece of land, so we went to the [Israeli] Ministry of the Land. . . and they told him [my father], ‘when the Arabs return us our properties we can return for you your properties.’ They answer him like that! And then, you see, now on the piece of land near Katamon they build the hospital. . . on the same land of my father! And we have everything, the papers, but you cannot do

anything- they take the thing by force, you know. . .nobody could stop them; they are doing what they want. . . This is our problem here, yes, this is our problem in Jerusalem and everywhere, not just here, in the West Bank too. . . it is very difficult. When you want to build, you need a special permission from the Israeli government. . . now there is a problem. . .[the Israelis] took a big piece of land there [in a Christian area of Jerusalem] to make the Wall. Why this Wall? Instead of this Wall we need to build for our children. . . for our community to build them houses to live, to get married. . .”

Ashley: “So do the Christians try to live together?”

Joseph: “Yes. . . to be more close to each other. Yes, yes, yes because, you know, if a Christian family goes to a Muslim quarter or something like that and you don’t have Christians, so when your children grow up its very difficult for them to live as Christians. So we should look for another place to live to be in that section because, you know, the mentality of the people, that’s why. We have as a Christian a mentality and as a religious Muslim [they have a] mentality. [Regarding relationships with other Palestinian Christians] The Latins are something else, it is a little bit difficult with the Latin Church. . . you know after 1948..it was difficult for our people, for our community, to have a jobs so the Franciscan fathers. . . have some people as laborers. . . So if want to get a job with them, you have to follow the Catholic church so most of these families they became Catholics. . .”

Wiiam, 34, Gaza City, Pharmacist

Wiiam has spent her entire life in Gaza, only visiting the West Bank on two separate occasions. She is married and has young children. She and her husband have exhausted all faith in a Muslim society. They believe they will have better chance of leading a normal life under the Israelis and thus they secretly study Hebrew together at night, a dangerous act that

Hamas would consider treason. Wiiam was not comfortable speaking about the situation of the Christians, thus, I gave her the questions and she provided a written response.

Wiiam: “I used to be proud of being a Palestinian Christian but now I am, sometimes, ashamed of being Palestinian. This relates to the situations which I face in my daily life. I hope I was a Christian in any other place to find peace, life facilities, ordinary wishes and future for my kids.

In general, Palestinian Christians are somewhat more advanced in their thoughts than Muslims. According to the small number of Christians in Gaza, they look like one family; most of them are relatives as there is no way to marry from the same narrow society. Muslims look at Christians as strangers. Christians differ in appearance, clothes, politeness, traditions. Most Christians are of these good characteristics while some Muslims are so.

A Christian Woman can share in social activities in both public and private jobs. She deals with Muslim women and men with the limits of her work to prevent anyone from talking about her fame if she accidentally laughed with her male colleague.

Most Christians need to be well-educated. They register their kids in Christian schools to ensure they are well treated in a good environment and that they are educated the Christian studies. Although these schools are expensive, they need the best future for their children. Students have to study at Islamic Universities as there is no other choices.

Christians are not free in their home country. They are always faced with people who invite them to be Muslims. Men can not wear golden rings, watches or any golden thing because it is an offence. Women can't wear T-shirts freely, they will be criticized to walk in the street or go to work without [long] sleeves! They can wear T-shirts only if they are going to a specific known place by their private cars. People look at a Christian woman as a godless

because she does not wear a [head] scarf. She cannot hang a cross on her neck to tell all the world she is Christian. Christian women cannot swim in the sea freely as they must wear full clothes in order to swim.

We are faced with discrimination every day. One day in the university a professor advised me to marry any Muslim, as I am a gem that must be earned by Muslims and not by Christians. Then I had no reply and I could not reply but I was sure I would never do so. Another female colleague used to congratulate me in Christmas only and not in Easter and she told me that she believed in the birth of Christ but not in his death on the Cross. I also could not reply. At my work, some employees do not reply when I say Good morning as they need me to say only their Islamic greeting 'salam aleeko.' One day a female patient wanted to describe me, she said the pharmacist of the hair [William will not wear any type of Muslim head covering]. I became somewhat nervous and asked her if I was the only one who had hair and if she had hair or not. In the first months of my job I went to the general manager of the primary healthcare with the responsible pharmacist to ask him giving me a permission to be late for work on Sundays in order to go to the church. He replied that I had to come on Fridays to work instead [the pharmacy is closed on Fridays for Muslim prayer]. I then told him it was impossible and all Christians in the MOH [Gaza Ministry of Health] had gotten the permission. Then he gave me the permission and promised to change the law. I always hear about other Christians. . . Others talked about the Christian baker who has the best bread in Gaza like this: although he is Christian, he is not a cheater.

Sure, I feel I am treated differently as a Christian. Most of them especially who knew me by dealing with me respect me because I respect them and myself as well. Others despise

me, as they think that I am out of their kingdom and do not share them the grace as I do not wear like them.

Silence is the best way to deal with them because I need to work and I need to still alive. Any reply in these situations can be unwise and can be transferred in another way to others who can behave as defendants of their religion.

With the Israelis it is complicated. They let us come out of Gaza for Christmas and Easter to go and visit the place of the birth and death of Christ. They never let the Muslims go out for any Muslim holidays. This means that they know we are not the ones hating them. When I think of Jew, I think of Jesus. We got our church from their synagogue and that makes us much closer to them than the Muslims, Protestants, Catholics and others. It is difficult because the Protestants and the Catholics always try to make themselves known for all Christians. The problem is that we Orthodox are very different than them and that means we are being represented by people who are not at all like us. We should be the ones representing because we are the original. But we are not known. I think the educated ones [Israelis] know this. We are very much the same in many ways. The problem is not religious but with ethnic because we are Palestinian. This is why I said I am ashamed to be Palestinian. Look at what Hamas does. Hamas says the Jews cannot live beside us. That makes me ashamed. A Palestinian Christian would never say this because Jewish people are fellow humans and most of all they are the people of Christ. Yes it is very sad how Israel became a country but that is in the past. It is silly to be angry at grandchildren for what their grandparents did. So when Israel attacks Gaza, I know why. It makes me sad because I am scared for my family, but I understand why Israel has to defend.

Sometimes I dream about a different life. We are still in Gaza but the Muslims accept us. And we can go into Israel with no problems because the Israelis accept too. We congratulate each other on Eid, Passover and Easter. My children go to their school friends home to celebrate Shabbat and the parents come to church with us to see how Orthodox came out of their synagogue. My husband can wear his wedding ring outside of our home. I can swim in a [bathing] suit and read a book on the beach. This is how it would be if we Orthodox could represent all Palestinian people. If we could talk to the Israelis then the Israelis might give Palestinians a chance. If Palestinians had a chance then the Muslims would not be so fanatics. Now it is like ping pong with Muslims and Jews going back and back again. Neither will stop the game but we Orthodox would. I know this because you cannot find one Orthodox here who hates Muslims or Jews. If we hate then we are not Orthodox.

What connects me with Palestine is the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, his life stories in Palestine, his death on the Cross in Jerusalem and the glorious resurrection. This is a pure religious matter that attracts me to live in Palestine. However, when talking about Gaza it is a place where the prophet Philip visited it one day. I am proud of being a Christian Palestinian and this will never be deleted wherever I go. . . I would like to live in any other place of Palestine rather than Gaza in order to feel of being in the Holy Land.

I want to stay here because too many of us have left. In Gaza we are so few, but this is still part of the Holy Land and we need to be here. Our church in Gaza was built in 4th century. If we are not here, the Muslims will destroy it. When we are so small every person matters. . . But staying in Gaza is not encouraging as we feel of being in a prison. Both my brother and sister are abroad and they cannot come to visit us and vice versa. Numerous

things are not found like materials for constructions, wood to make a bed, gifts, good clothes, good shoes, good bags for the schools, nylon cover for books and notebooks, peanut butter for the health of kids, Nesquik powder for the kids. Sometimes milk is not found and other times toilet tissues, flour, cheese. . . These things seem to be not important but they are necessary when you need them. Moreover, my kids need to visit the zoo, a circus show and an amusement town [park] which are not found in Gaza. They do not live their childhood.

But still, we must stay. This is what it is to be Palestinian Orthodox.”

Reflections and Conclusion

The Palestinian Orthodox Christians who remain in Israel and the Palestinian territories are devoted to their belief in their sacred ancestry and their subsequent duty to guard their Holy Sites. They demonstrate a melancholic ambivalence toward the conflict, as they have resigned themselves to being overlooked and misunderstood by all major players. As a result of exclusion and discrimination, they maintain an unwavering loyalty to their own group. Although they have lost faith in Muslim Palestinians, Jewish Israelis and even other Christian Palestinians, they continue to desire to be accepted among all peoples. They express this wish by dealing with all groups with kindness and respect, regardless of the wrongs committed against them. Although one could argue that they maintain this approach in defense since they are a rapidly diminishing minority, I found the Palestinian Orthodox to be genuine in their desire to live among both majority groups in peace. I was astonished that even those who had suffered a misfortune show no resentment, for example the three interviewees from Gaza who recently found themselves in the middle of a war by default.

They may acknowledge and mourn their often dismal situation, but they ultimately wish to forgive the past and move forward.

The strength of their conviction in the sacred foundation of their collective purpose provides the Palestinian Orthodox with a strong social identity. When confronting discrimination, persecution, stereotypes and social exclusion, the Palestinian Orthodox cling to a collective understanding of self that transcends all current hardships. As the only surviving link to the original Christians, they believe that they have the favor of God. This favor offers them a metaphysical protection, as God will take care of them if they keep their end of the sacred pact and remain in what they consider their Holy Land. This belief has become a type of mantra for the Palestinian Orthodox, a comforting conviction in a time and place that offer no certainty.

In comparison with both the Israelis and the Muslim Palestinians, the Orthodox Christians lack agency. They are viewed as the “religious other” by Palestinian Muslims and as the “ethnic other,” often unknowingly grouped in with the Muslim majority, by the Israeli Jews. As a result, they default to each other and continue to foster their collective identity in response to their harrowing circumstances. When turned away at a checkpoint, robbed of their land, mocked, scorned or insulted, the Palestinian Orthodox retreat to their Christian nation within the Jewish Israeli nation state and Muslim Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian Orthodox Christians express discomfort in talking about those who have emigrated. They explain their disappearance as a desire for a better life and, as Sam summarized in his interview, a result of temptation. Sam’s word choice is significant. Just as he understands the decision to remain in the region on religious terms, he understands immigration in the same light. I believe this is indicative of the collective understanding of

the Palestinian Christian disappearance, as their entire worldview relates back to their religious historic narrative. In line with their commitment to forgiveness, the Palestinian Orthodox openly express empathy and do not seem to blame their compatriots for leaving. At the same time, they cling to their purpose in the Holy Land to ground themselves in their decision to stay. Furthermore, they also avoid detailed discussions on the Palestinian Orthodox who are now of a western denomination. I sense sadness, or perhaps disappointment, in the way in which these former Orthodox are discussed. It is clear that, once a Palestinian Orthodox leaves the faith, he/she has broken the sacred pact and is no longer a part of the group. The Palestinian Orthodox Christians are aware that their hardships have increased as a result of their decreasing number. Nevertheless, they do not resent those who, whether through immigration or conversation, have sought a better life. Instead, they avoid the discussion all together, simply reinforcing their belief that their sacred duty transcends all current hardships.

Contrary to common assumptions, the Palestinian Orthodox Christians tend to exhibit sympathy with the Israelis. When, for instance, those living on the West Bank and Gaza Strip are permitted to enter Jerusalem for Easter, they feel validated as the original Christians. They are being positively acknowledged as a separate, neutral group apart from the Muslims and Christian Palestinians of western denominations and thus they develop benevolence toward the Israelis. Furthermore, since the Orthodox Church does indeed maintain many Jewish practices, traditions, services and the early Jewish historic narrative, they feel connected to the Israeli Jews on a religious plane. The Israeli Jews who are aware of the Palestinian Orthodox as a distinctive group respond positively. While waiting a checkpoint to enter Israel from the West Bank, for instance, I noticed that the young

Palestinian woman in front of me had clipped an Orthodox Christian religious icon to the inside of her identification documents. When she handed her documents to the Israeli soldier, he opened the first page, quickly shut and returned the documents and let her pass without any questioning. This was highly outside the norm, as all of the other Palestinians were questioned extensively on that day. Prior to our interview, I asked Ana to clarify this incident. She responded that hiding an icon in the identification documents is a secret, unspoken code among the Palestinian Orthodox and the Israeli soldiers. When they see the icon, assuming they are aware of the Palestinian Orthodox, they know that person is not a foe. Ana was quick to tell me not to advertise this interaction, as Palestinian Muslim knowledge of this code would only serve to increase tensions.

With the Palestinian Muslims, the Palestinian Orthodox are careful to separate those who are educated, meaning those who understand Orthodox Christianity, and those who are ignorant of their historic origins in the shared Holy Land. The older Palestinian Orthodox remember a time when ethnicity was larger than religion and, subsequently, when Muslim relations were better. Yet they express no desire to reverse their present priority. As Ana attests in her interview: “it is more important that I am a Christian than a Palestinian.”

This project was a small survey of Palestinian Orthodox. All Palestinian Orthodox are happy to talk to foreigners interested in their religious heritage; however, the challenge remained finding those who were willing to disclose their true relationship with the Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews. On a day to day basis, they maintain that they have no problems with either group. In fact, those in Jerusalem are proud to have Jewish doctors and Muslim neighbors, boasting a plural, albeit severely segregated, society. While living and working in Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, it quickly became obvious that the

cheerful relationships were superficial. This is a survival technique. For instance, while living in Jerusalem, I learned that a Palestinian Orthodox man was stabbed to death in Gaza by a Palestinian Muslim. Although the Hamas government claimed it was a robbery related death that had nothing to do with religion, the Orthodox Palestinians secretly confided that he had spoken out against the Muslim treatment of the Christians days before his death. Furthermore, the Palestinian Orthodox must sustain a cooperative appearance not only for their individual safety, but to ensure the survival of their group. As Wiam identifies, “when we are so small every person matters.” Although this project ideally would have included more Palestinian Orthodox, I realize that I am fortunate to have been able to collect even nine interviews in such a tense and dangerous environment.

The current situation of the Palestinian Orthodox shapes their social identity. Viewed as “the other” by both majorities, the Orthodox cultivate their own nation in response to their circumstances. Since religion serves as the differentiating factor, religion simultaneously unites and legitimizes the group. In this specific time and place, the sacred identity enables the Palestinian Orthodox to make sense of their situation as the misunderstood, unrepresented and discriminated minority. Without this collective understanding of self, the Palestinian Orthodox either would have fled or been absorbed into the majority and thus their survival is contingent upon their ability to continually rationalize their existence. Despite all hardships and injustices, they desire to live in peace with both Muslim Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. Perhaps it is this tiny, suppressed and largely unknown group of Orthodox Christians who, in one of the most longstanding and complex ethnic-religious conflicts in the world, are the ones to remind us that forgiveness, tolerance and peace are all still possible.

Works Cited

- Ana. Personal Interview. 15. November. 2009.
- Bowman, Glenn. "Nationalizing the Sacred: Shrines and Shifting Identities in the Israeli-Occupied Territories." *Man*. 28.3 (1993): 431-460. Print.
- "Declining Palestinian Christian population fears its churches are turning into museums." *Haaretz Online Edition*. 7. October. 2010. Retrieved 25. October. 2010
- Dina. Personal Interview. 20. December. 2009.
- Dumper, Michael. "The Churches of Jerusalem in the Post-Oslo Period." *Journal of Palestinian Studies*. 31.2 (2002): 51-65. Print.
- Feleppa, Robert. "Emics, Etics and Social Objectivity." *Current Anthropology*. 23.3 (1986): 243-255. Print.
- Gerring, John and Jason Seawright. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options." *Political Research Quarterly*. 16:2 (2008): 294-308. Print.
- Goren, Tamir. "Hasan Bey Shukri and His Contribution to the Integration of Jews in the Haifa Municipality at the Time of the British Mandate." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 33.1 (2006): 19-36. Print.
- Herzog, Michael. "Can Hamas be Tamed?" *Foreign Affairs*. 82.2 (2006): 83-94. Print.
- Howard, Judith. A. "Social Psychology of Identities." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 26 (2000): 367-393. Print.
- JanMohamed, Abdul and David Lloyd. Introduction. *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Joseph. Personal Interview. 22. November. 2009.
- Khalidi, Rashid. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.
- Nada. Personal Interview. 31. October. 2009.

- Nassar, Issam. "The Trauma of al-Nakba: Collective Memory and the Rise of Palestinian National Identity." In: Sarat, Austin, et al. *Trauma and Memory: Reading, Healing, and Making Law*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 65-77. Print.
- Noor. Personal Interview. 25. November. 2009.
- Oren, Neta, et al. "Conflict, Identity, and Ethos: The Israeli- Palestinian Case." In: Lee, Yueh-Ting, et al. *The Psychology of Ethnic and Cultural Conflict*. Westport: Praeger, 2004.
- "Population, Housing and Establishment Census 2007: Summary of the Census Final Results in the West Bank." *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*, 2008.
- Reicher, Stephen. "The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance and Change." *Political Psychology*. 25.6 (2004): 921-945. Print.
- "Religion, Israel;" "Religion, Gaza Strip." *CIA World Factbook*. Last updated 4 October 2010. Retrieved 25 October 2010.
- Said, Edward. "The One-State Solution." [New York Times Magazine](#) January 10, 1999. Online.
- Sam. Personal Interview. 19. December. 2009.
- Sanders, Jimmy M. "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 28 (2002): 327-357. Print.
- Selma. Personal Interview. 31. October. 2009.
- Sennott, Charles M. *The Body and the Blood: The Middle East's Vanishing Christians and the Possibility for Peace*. New York: Public Affairs, 2003.
- Sherman, Lawrence W. and Heather Strang. "Experimental Ethnography: The Marriage of Qualitative and Quantitative Research." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 595 (2004): 204-222. Print.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Tsimhoni, Daphne. "Demographic Trends of the Christian Population in Jerusalem and the

- West Bank 1948-1978." *Middle East Journal*. 37.1 (1983): 54-64. Print.
- Tsimhoni, Daphne. "The Status of Arab Christians under the British Mandate in Palestine." *Middle Eastern Studies*. 20.4 (1984): 166-192. Print.
- Tsuda, Takeyuki. "Ethnicity and the Anthropologist: Negotiating Identities in the Field." *Anthropological Quarterly*. 71.3 (1998): 107-124. Print.
- Wiiam. Personal Interview. 25. November. 2009.
- Zach. Personal Interview. 25. November. 2009.