



Franck Salameh:

Christians in Holy Land Face “Existential Dangers”

Boston College Professor Sees Oldest Christian Community “Caught in Crossfire”

ZURICH – In a recent lecture here, Professor Franck Salameh of Boston College described the history and current plight of Christians in the “Holy Land” (Israel and the Palestinian Territories.) Along with other Christians in the Middle East, Holy Land Christians, the oldest Christian communities in the world, today face “existential dangers,” Salameh said. “Their problems preceded the Arab–Israeli conflict,” he argued. “Their plight is the sequel and the natural continuation of a long process of erasure and annihilation.”

In his lecture, provocatively entitled, “Christians of the Holy Land – Exodus, Disintegration, and Ideological Necrophilia,” Salameh drew attention to the tendency in the media and academia to impose new identities on Holy Land dwellers, using exclusively the language of modern nationalism, and thereby negating historic identities that are still alive, well and politically potent. In the case of Christians, the now-obsolete terms of Arab nationalism - “Arabs” or “Palestinians” - are still used for them collectively, whereas they historically identified themselves in terms of religious community.

Today, there is a tendency among Holy Land Christians to cast off these names and revive the ethno-religious ones that predate the failed project of Arab nationalism. Salameh suggested that those writing and speaking about the Christians of the region should use the national appellations that these religious communities used for themselves – Greek Orthodox, Copts, Chaldeans, Maronites, Syriacs, etc. - long before Arab nationalist ideology was imposed on them. Doing so, he argued, will help make sense of their current plight.

Salameh went on to describe the history of the Holy Land’s Christians from their origins in the time of the New Testament, through the Islamic conquests, the various Islamic empires, the Crusades, British rule, and finally, the Arab-Israeli conflict. “Under Muslim rule,” Salameh said, “Christians of the Holy Land gradually became a minority in their ancestral homeland, suffering the exactions of *dhimmitude* –the legal restrictions that Islam placed on non-Muslims – causing their status and numbers to deteriorate over the course of 14 centuries.”

As a result, “Christians of the Holy Land are today a mere shadow of their pre-Muslim Conquest existence,” Salameh said. “They are barely two percent of the total population – roughly 160,000 strong in Israel proper and 40,000 in the West Bank and Gaza.”

Within the borders of Israel, Salameh said, Christians have a “tenuous,” “vulnerable” status, their relations with the Jewish majority being “crippled by intransigence and resentments of the Arab–Israeli conflict.” Nevertheless, Israel is a “safe haven” for Christians in a dangerous region. “Israel has since its founding recorded an increase in its Christian population,” Salameh noted, “even as the numbers of

Christians continue to dwindle elsewhere in the Middle East.” Today, they are “the most enterprising, open-minded, and prosperous Arabophone element in Israeli society.”

In contrast, in territory controlled by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, *dhimmitude* conditions persist, and Christians “may indeed be on the verge of perdition,” Salameh said. “Faced with daily offenses ranging from the wanton defacement of their institutions, to public displays of contempt, to intimidation, extortion, and pressure to abide by Islamic law,” thousands of Christians have chosen to emigrate from the land altogether. The town of Bethlehem, Salameh said, was 90% Christian through the 1960s; today, under Palestinian Authority rule, Christians are less than 30%.

It is common today to attribute the crisis for Holy Land Christians entirely to the troubles caused by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Salameh resoundingly rejected this approach, pointing out that Middle Eastern Christians were dispossessed long before the creation of Israel, and still face extermination in countries where the conflict is not a factor, like Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Instead, he said, the crisis for Christians in the Holy Land and the rest of the Middle East calls for “straightforward, honest inquiries into their history of dispossession.”

“Beyond the platitudes, and beyond the perfunctory expressions of concern and sympathy,” Salameh concludes, Holy Land Christians “need answers as to whether or not their cultures, their civilizations, their histories, and their ancestral languages are worth saving.”