

THE ARMENIANS AND THE GREEKS AT THE HOLY SEPULCHRE

Our cable TV company got into a row with CNN (apparently over money) and cancelled that service last year. So we are left to depend on the BBC for our daily news, on Fox for news talk, and France 24 for news broadcasts (in English) every half hour.

The BBC led its evening hourly news broadcast the other night with scenes of a terrific punch-up donnybrook between Greek and Armenian priests, their acolytes, laymen and the Israel Police and Border Police, right there in front of the Aedicule—the structure housing the tomb of Jesus—inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Crash, bang, wallop! They were really hard at it. And in one of Christendom’s holiest places. No wonder the BBC had it as the leading story in the world that evening.

The Armenians were having a procession to mark their holiday of the Finding of the Cross. Their priest went into the Aedicule but the Greek Orthodox objected to him being there without the presence of a Greek monk inside also, as stipulated (they say) by the Status Quo, so that the Armenians, say the Greeks, should not use their presence there alone to claim future rights to the place. Precedent, and all that...

The Armenians refused to let him in, saying that the Status Quo allowed the Armenian monk to be in there alone and the Greeks were enjoined by the Status Quo from interfering with their worship. A fist-fight and punch-up followed. It ended quickly enough with a few arrests (one on each side!) and some superficial wounds. Nobody was seriously hurt. Good news too that nobody has blamed us; the Jews weren’t involved. (*but see the p.s., below*) Nor were the Latins. We might have had diplomatic problems all over Europe if that had happened.

Yet this bizarre incident was only the latest in an 800-year old conflict between the Christian communities in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We have written about a previous scuffle, at Easter, 2002, connected with the very same issue: whether an Armenian priest is allowed to go into the Aedicule without the presence of a Greek priest in there with him. But to understand what all this is about we need to do some potted history.

Constantine the Great built that church in the early 4th century CE over the place of crucifixion and burial of Jesus.¹ It was destroyed several times after that, re-built by the Greeks and then the Latins (Roman Catholics) during the Crusades. Saladin took it away from the

¹ The basilica was dedicated on September 17th, 335

Latins and gave the keys to a Muslim family(!) and most of the church itself back to the Greeks.

The Latins and the Greeks, together with the Armenians, have the larger parts of the complex. Ethiopian Copts, Egyptian Copts and Assyrians have small portions inside. So for the past 800 years the communities—each ferociously jealous of their property rights—have been jostling and quarreling about who is allowed to do what and where and when. The Turks, who ruled Palestine for 400 years until 1918, issued any number of decrees (6 different ones between 1630 and 1637!) sorting out the situation, each decree the result of a bribe from one party or the other. At one stage, the Georgian Orthodox, who had been there for centuries, lost all their rights in the church (forever!) because they couldn't afford the bribe! The final, official-100%-kosher Status Quo—based on an earlier one of 1757—was issued by the Turkish Sultan Abdul Mejid in 1852.

A document prepared in 1929 for the British Mandatory government summarized and finalized the issue and this is a booklet called *The Status Quo in the Holy Places*² which is now THE LAW.

I went through my well-worn copy of that Status Quo booklet (Talk about nitty-gritty! It was hard going.) and found nothing about this particular festival and the Armenian/Greek rights connected with it. But I am not surprised at the quick tempers. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is too important to too many different religious communities, each wishing to have a greater part of the holy place and wary of the infringement on their rights by others. Disputes are bound to happen.

The acrimony between the parties wouldn't interest us particularly but for the fact that the Church itself is in dreadful shabby disrepair. The Aedicule—19th century Greek-ugly to begin with, but nobody can replace it without the consent of the others (fat chance!)—is held up from collapsing after the earthquake of 1927³ by ugly iron girders erected by the British Mandate government shortly thereafter. And they're still there! This is just one of the shabby features of what should be one of the most beautiful and important pilgrim places in the world. And it's all because fixing something means owning it(!) and since nobody can agree who owns it, nobody will let anyone else fix it. Then the animosity over ownership spills over to friction about usage, as in the Armenian holiday procession earlier this month. Suspicion all around; the result is an intolerable situation.

Now, calm down, Walter, because NONE of the following is about to happen. First because it's politically impossible and second because it is far from clear that any of the parties involved are even interested in making it happen.

² By L.G.A. Cust, re-published by Ariel Publishing, Jerusalem, 1980.

³ The most recent big one, July 11, 1927, a force 6.3 quake centered near Jericho.

BUT, IF IT WERE UP TO ME, I would confiscate the whole darn church and throw everybody out. We can make times for prayers for all the communities; no problem. But nobody except the government of Israel should OWN any of it. And, by the way, nobody should live there. No owners means no claims and therefore no fights about repairs, upkeep, maintenance, etc. Or suspicious disputes about usage.

The Israeli government needs to take charge of repairing/ restoring/renewing the place. And for that it needs to spend a lot of money which it probably won't want to do. So it can invite contributions, raise an international fund, go to UNESCO, the Church, the Greeks, the Saudis, or just schnorr for this church like they do for everything else.

We will make enemies of the entire orthodox Christian world Latins, Greeks, Armenians, Copts, etc. but who cares? We owe nothing to any of them. None of them are particular friends of Israel or even vaguely Zionist. The various Protestant groups, most of whom ARE our friends, won't care. In any case this magnificent building is worth it. It must not be allowed to further deteriorate because of this constant internecine warfare between the communities using it. Sez me.

P.S.

It isn't exactly true that nobody blamed the Israelis for that altercation in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Armenians did. They say the Israel Police acted much more violently against the Armenians than against the Greeks on that day, as on all other days, because the interests of Israel are definitely with the Greeks, not with the Armenians, Latins, Copts or anybody else.

It's all about **REAL ESTATE**, of course. Because the Greeks own a lot of it and nobody else does and the Israelis want/need/use Greek real estate for their plans for the development of Jerusalem. The fact that the Knesset building itself sits on land rented from the Greek Orthodox Church influenced the approval of the old Patriarch, Ireneous, and accounts for the continued support of the Israel government for this Patriarch long after he was rejected by his own community.

Real estate; the fact that Jewish interests have purchased large buildings just inside Jaffa Gate from the Greeks—an affair we wrote about twice this year—influenced the selection of the new Patriarch, Theophilos, because the government wasn't about to allow the replacement of the old Patriarch with the new one without being very careful to protect its real estate purchases and holdings.

So that's the sub text. But I still say we need to take over that church once and for all and get it back in the shape it deserves. ■