

Christian Private Schools and International Human Rights Conventions

In recent weeks, we have heard and read a great deal in our press and local media about the issue of Christian private schools, budgets, meetings and strikes. We have also heard and read a lot of comments on this issue, some were positive and others were negative, some were correct and others were far from the truth.

There is really no one to blame as all or most of us are unaware of the history of our schools, the reasons and the circumstances of their establishment, their mission and purpose. We do not know our history, and it is intended that we remain ignorant of the pertinent issues, misconstruing our understanding of the matter and how to deal with it.

In the Hebrew media, the issue of Christian private schools is almost absent. It is not surprising that they do not highlight an issue that on the surface is related to budgets, but is fundamentally about a flagrant violation of human rights and international conventions relating to cultural, social and indigenous minority rights.

In this article, I will attempt to briefly present some of the key stages in the development of education and schooling in our country.

1) The Ottoman period

- a. This period extends from the early sixteenth century until the end of the First World War. During this time, the entire East fell into ignorance and illiteracy. Most of the cities and villages did not have any schools except for some small ones attached to mosques (Madrasas), where children would learn to memorize and recite the holy Koran, thus mastering the Arabic language and becoming knowledgeable in the Muslim religion.

With the exception of Lebanon, where the field of education was a little broader, the situation in Palestine was, to a large extent, similar to that in the other Ottoman Empire States, especially in Greater Syria.

- b. As for the Christians, the churches and monasteries preserved the Arabic and other languages, training clergy, and in the absence of schools, taught and educated the people.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly following Napoleon's campaigns and the subsequent opening up of relationships between East and West, some local Christian clergy, bishops and priests, initiated the creation of small schools next to the churches (the Orthodox Church, the Melkite Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic (Latin) Patriarchate).

These were small schools of one or two rooms, with one class for girls and one for boys, where the children were divided into groups according to their age and abilities. Children studied the Arabic language, principles of arithmetic, history, geography and Christian religion. The mission of these schools was to preserve the Christian faith and save Christians from ignorance and oblivion.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Sultan allowed many Western institutions to come to the East and establish projects, including commercial, economic, educational and religious ventures. Several Christian institutions came to Palestine and the neighboring countries and established schools, hospitals and orphanages in cities such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nazareth, Haifa, Acre, Jaffa and Shefa-Amr. These institutions created a renaissance in Palestinian society on health, cultural and social levels.

The institutions established separate elementary and preparatory schools for boys and girls, which had a significant impact on the number of girls going out to study, as well as influencing the general cultural level in the country. The girls studied skills necessary for their family life, languages and other subjects, especially home economics, while the boys' education focused on scientific and vocational subjects as well as languages.

The main mission of these schools was Christian education for their Christian students, in order to maintain their presence in this country of Christ, but they also opened their doors to non-Christian students; Muslims and Druze.

These institutions include:

- Terra Sancta School, which is the oldest
- Salesian School, with its scientific and vocational branches
- Russian Orthodox Schools (such as the Russian Compound (Muscobi) in Nazareth)
- Sisters of Nazareth Schools
- St. Joseph Sisters Schools
- Franciscan Sisters Schools
- Protestant Schools

2) British Mandate period 1920-1948

Despite all the political disadvantages of the British Mandate, it attended to and supported formal education in all public and private schools. During this period, the number of students attending schools increased significantly, and some of these schools became secondary schools.

This period in the history of Palestine had great cultural significance, as scores of educated young people graduated from the private schools and took up senior positions in their community and abroad, because of their knowledge of foreign languages.

3) The State of Israel since 1948

I will start by mentioning an important and noble effort made by the Christian private schools during the Nakba in 1948. These schools and monasteries opened their doors to hundreds of Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their villages. These refugees could not find any shelter except in the Christian schools and monasteries, which welcomed them, their families and their children for long periods.

With regard to education, these schools continued to teach according to the old curriculum, until they were forced to follow the Israeli curriculum to prepare students for the High School matriculation exams (Bagrut). From the outset, the Israeli Ministry of Education, issued blatantly discriminatory budgets between the schools. Christian private schools received budgets far lower than those of Jewish private religious schools, forcing them to obtain part of the tuition fees from the parents of the students, thus making it costly for both the parents and the schools.

Over time, the Ministry of Education continued to reduce the budgets of these schools. Creating an ever larger gap between what a student in a public school or a **Jewish private school** receives compared to the meager amount a student in a **Christian private school** receives. This difference has been paid, for decades, by the parents of the students who want their children to have a high quality level of education, in spite of the burden they have to bear. In addition, a portion of the budget gaps have been filled by some aid from European Christian institutions. It is necessary to mention that during this time, some elementary and preparatory schools have

become high schools, and new schools have been established such as the Salesian Sisters School (Mukhales) and the St. Joseph Seminary School (Bishop's School) in Nazareth.

During these periods, most of the students in the Christian private schools were Christians, because their parents wanted to teach their children the principles and foundations of the Christian religion, even if they had to pay tuition. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the percentage of Palestinian Christians in Palestine was around 20%, and in some areas reached 80% (Nazareth, Bethlehem, Ramallah, etc.). This situation began to change after 1948 with the demographic changes that occurred in Palestine.

4) How are all of the above related to human rights?

- "Human Rights" is a broad and deep concept that would require many pages to clarify and explain in detail. I will confine myself here to saying that human rights, with all their legislations and conventions, seeks to secure a **decent** life for every human being to live in his/her country in full **equality** with the other citizens. **Equality** is the first pillar of any democratic rule, and Israel defines itself in its laws, its Declaration of Independence, and in all the positions of its leaders, as a democratic state. So where is this democracy and equality among citizens, when the state pays a certain amount for the education of a student, and does not pay half of this amount for another student?

Where is this equality when a Jewish private school receives full support from the Ministry of Education, while a Christian private school does not receive the same amount? Where is this equality when a lot of parents are forced to relinquish their children's participation in some school activities because they cannot pay for these activities that students in other schools receive for free? Where is this equality when a private body establishes a school on their land and in buildings they own, with all the costs entailed of construction and maintenance, thus saving the ministry huge amounts of money, and its remuneration is to receive reduced allocations? Where is the equality?

- What can we understand from the ministry's behavior and its conditions on the Christian private schools? The ministry says:
 - **If these schools become official public schools, they will receive the same budgets as other schools.** (However this condition is not required by Jewish private schools)
 - **If this condition is not accepted, we will continue to reduce the budget, and schools will be prevented from retrieving the shortfall from the parents.**

From these conditions, we can only understand one thing; the ministry or the government wants to get rid of these schools and close them. Why? When all of the Ministry of Education studies have shown that Christian private schools provide the best educational results in the country.

- The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been adopted by the majority of countries across the world, as well as the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, provide for the need to respect the cultural and religious rights of minorities, particularly indigenous minorities of a country. We, the Palestinians, are the indigenous residents of this land, we did not immigrate to the State of Israel, on the contrary, it came to us, so it must respect our cultural rights and especially our language, and everything we carry from our indigenous culture. Furthermore, we have been present culturally and ethnically for thousands of years, and as Christians for two thousand years. Therefore, no state that considers itself a United Nations state or a "civilized" country, which has signed international conventions, is entitled to violate the terms of these conventions in its

treatment of the indigenous minority, who became a minority and citizens of this state by virtue of military events. This attack on Christian culture is not only happening through restrictions on Christian schools, but extends to the Christian holy places and monuments, and government silence over attacks on Christian and Muslim places of worship. Our question is; “What would be the response of Jews around the world towards similar treatment of Jewish private schools by the state?” i.e. If the state would discriminate in its budgets between private schools affiliated to any religion or any purpose and Jewish private schools??

5) Did Christian private schools make a mistake? What must we do to support them?

- a. Some say why do you call them “Christian schools”, this gives them a religious and sectarian nature? This objection, at first glance, may seem correct, as conditions have changed during the last hundred years; political systems ruling over the country have changed, the number of adherents to each religion or those unaffiliated with any religion has changed, this is true! Many things have changed, but the mission of any institution does not change with circumstances, unless the owners announce the change and turn it into another institution with a different aim and mission. Maintaining the Christian spiritual and intellectual presence in the East, and especially in the holy land, the land of Christ, is more of what we need in these miserable years.

Christian schools and institutions, either local or foreign (most of the administrations have become local), have **never** provided their services on a sectarian basis. Today, we are in need of schools that perpetuate the spirit of love and cooperation, the spirit of honesty and sincerity, and the spirit of intellectual freedom. Have these schools always contributed to perpetuating this spirit? Have they always upheld their first and supreme mission?

Many errors may have occurred, small and large, but we will overlook these errors today recalling all the good that these schools have provided and still continue to offer, as there is no human that works without making mistakes.

- b. The Christian private schools have opened their doors to all religious groups, and have been the edifices in which the Christian and Muslim and Druze come together, and this mixing is what has woven strong and steadfast relations between many of the graduates of these schools. The good they presented was for everyone, no one was excluded for sectarian reasons; these schools are for all of us and not for one sect. There is no Palestinian family that has not had one or all of their sons and daughter study in one of these schools. So we are **all** invited to think and work together to prevent attempts to eradicate these institutions.
- c. The first and final question:
Is a ‘democratic’ state that has all the international advantages of a democratic state, entitled to erase our cultural, religious and civil identity and financially blackmail us, by threatening that unless we adhere to the feelings, thoughts and sentiments of the state, they will cut off our budget?!

Each of us has to think about this and provide a response.

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3 September 2015