

‘Price Tag’ Attacks: The Rising Cost for Church and Mosque

Editor's note: This thoughtful essay by a respected Arab Christian leader was written in calmer times but shows a side of this complicated situation which has recently escalated. We believe standing with Israel means also standing with our Christian brothers and sisters who are also Israeli citizens. They are not the ones creating the problem, but they are caught in the middle. We must understand their point-of-view and pray for them. –Steve Strang, CEO, Charisma Media

This short article is about neither Christian-Muslim relationships nor dialogue, though those are very important issues, especially in the Middle East. Nor is this a Christian theological response to Muslim dogma.

Rather, this article relates to a recent challenge confronting both the Muslim and Christian communities in Israel and to the response appropriate to both local and Western Christians.

For the last six years, Israeli society has witnessed a sad and worrying phenomenon known by the name “price tag.” This is a term for an illegal course of aggression attributed to radical right-wing groups in Israel. These extremists are warning their government and a watching world that there is a ‘price to pay’ for any land they regard as Jewish territory given to Palestinians as part of peace negotiations.

These activities began in 2008, and since then over 700 cases of “price tag” attacks have been registered by the Israeli police. The vast majority of these attacks were against Palestinians in the West Bank and their property. Events include such things as stone throwing, scattering spikes along roads traversed by Palestinian cars, burning fields and orchards, blocking roads, arson and other acts against

mosques, churches, and even against property belonging to the Israel Police or army (mostly vehicles), and, in some cases, damaging assaults on left-wing Israelis or Israeli Arabs.

It is important to note here that the group that the actions are attributed to is thought to be a marginal group, and their acts are condemned by most of the Jewish people in the country; many have gathered to protest and to express solidarity with the victims of these acts. Furthermore, a group of young Arab high school students in Shafar'amr (an Israeli Arab town) took the initiative and started to renovate an ancient synagogue in the city, as a positive response to "price tag" actions.

In recent days, "price tag" factions have expanded their field of activity beyond Palestinian areas into Israel proper, especially targeting Arab Israeli citizens and damaging properties of innocent people, as well as churches and mosques. For example on April 29, 2014, Furedis, a small Muslim village by the Mediterranean, was the target of such acts: several vehicles were damaged and graffiti scrawled on the walls of the mosque informed the villagers that this is not their place and one day it will be turned into a Yeshivah.

On that very day, a Jewish man came to the office of Bishop Boulos Marcuzzo, the Roman Catholic Bishop in Nazareth, and left a letter asking the bishop to deliver a message to all the Christian clergy in Israel, with the exception of those from Anglican and Protestant churches. According to the threatening message, the priests should tell their people to leave the country within 10 days or 100 Christians will be killed. The reason for this ultimatum, according to the letter, is that the Christians are defiling the land of Israel by using icons and statues in their churches. Just a few days earlier a group entered the famous "Loaves and Fishes" Church of Tabgha (north of Tiberias) and damaged a number of seats and one of the crosses.

The list could go on, and many other examples could be brought forward. Those who are interested can readily find more information on many of the Israeli and international newspaper websites. However, my purpose in bringing this issue up is to discuss the following questions.

First, what is our role as an evangelical minority in Israel in the face of such circumstances?

I'm sure that many of my dear brothers and sisters feel uneasy just *hearing* this question. The truth is, I feel this way myself. As an evangelical I was educated not to get involved in the issues of the world. Yet at the same time, I can't help but hear the psalmist's question: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" When people are threatened, when they or their property is attacked because of their ethnicity or religious background, what should the righteous do?

The answer to this question might not be easy, and maybe there is no one simple, straightforward answer. However, isn't the church called to a prophetic role in its society? I believe she is, and therefore what is important, in my opinion, is to acknowledge the problem and to prayerfully seek God's direction for us as His Body.

Leaving the issue as if nothing has happened or burying our heads in the sand, hoping that this wave will pass, will only leave our church membership bitter and confused, especially the younger generation. To sit on the sidelines is to transmit the message that our gospel is not relevant to our challenges.

Second, how could the Body of Christ around the world engage with this issue? Churches in the West are often reminded to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem," and I'm sure that many do that, likely having in mind political peace of this troubled region. This is good, of course; we all want to have "peaceful and quiet lives."

Yet, I wonder whether this is the ultimate peace of Jerusalem or if there is another peace achieved not by political agreements but by the message of the gospel, and through the Prince of Peace. If we as Christians sincerely believe that this is the “peace” God refers to in His word, then maybe we need to change the focus of our prayers and to start to pray for the group of people who are tasked with sharing the Good News with the people of this land. I refer, of course, to the local Body of Christ, the Church in Israel.

With all that is happening in this area, it is time to ask the question Nehemiah asked about the remnant, the small number of his brothers and sisters in the land. He himself, had a prosperous life, he was the cupbearer to the king of Persia, yet he cared for God’s people, a small and powerless minority in the midst of a chaotic and violent land.

His question was not the end of the story; rather, it was the beginning. In fact by sincerely seeking the peace of his brothers and sisters, Nehemiah was at the same time asking God to guide him to take the right steps to empower and strengthen them. Therefore, when seeking the “peace of Jerusalem” we should do that with expectation that God will guide us to practical steps to empower and strengthen the Church in the land.

Finally, for many centuries as a minority under different regimes, the main local Christian responses, to such problems in the Middle East has been simply keeping quiet and not denouncing poor and unfair treatment, or by seeking powerful international patrons, or by emigrating to the West. However, these three approaches are all problematic and inadequate in respect of living Christian witness in our region.

What should we do now? Especially recalling that the Christian population has declined to less than 2 percent of the total in Israel. I urgently believe that the answer is for the church (the local and the international) to take on its role and to

help the Christians in this land not only to face these challenges but also to be able to show the Christian values in dealing with such evils, in order to be “the salt of the earth,” since if we lose our saltiness, we are no longer good for anything.

In my view it is at a time such as this, that the church in the Holy Land, should pray for a renewed confidence in her Savior, His gospel, and his empowerment to be a force for peace, justice and reconciliation.

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