

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTIAN INTERESTS IN PALESTINE

1. In addition to the witnesses concerned exclusively with political issues, the Committee also heard representatives of Christian churches. The Arab Christians, divided among many denominations, and numbering some 125,000, form the overwhelming majority of Christians actually living in Palestine. Their delegation, led by the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee, declared their complete solidarity with the Moslem Arabs in the demand for an independent Arab State. The non-Palestinian Christian groups were unable to speak with a common voice. Indeed, Christians have so completely failed to achieve unity, or even harmony, in the practical tasks of administering the Christian Holy Places and caring for the pilgrims who visit them that the keys of the Holy Sepulchre are still entrusted to Moslems. The lamentable fact that there is no single spokesman in Palestine for Christendom tends to obscure the legitimate Christian interests in the Holy Land, which must be safeguarded in any solution of the national problem. This interest demands not only freedom of access to the Holy Places, but also that tranquillity should be achieved in a country all of which, from the Christian point of view, is a Holy Land.

2. The significance of Palestine since prehistoric times in the development of civilisation cannot be overestimated. Nor should the interests of archaeology and history be forgotten. The maintenance of conditions under which such studies can be pursued is a genuine concern of civilisation. Moreover, an increased pilgrim and tourist traffic would constitute an invisible export of substantial value to a country with so large an adverse balance of trade; and the contact in Palestine between these travellers from the Western world and the representatives of the Jewish and Moslem faiths would be of great importance to international understanding.

3. The extent to which the Holy Places, sacred to Christians, Moslems and Jews, are interspersed is often not fully appreciated. It is impossible to segregate the Holy Places sacred to the three great religions into separate geographical units. They are scattered over the whole of Palestine, and not, as is often imagined, confined to the Jerusalem and Nazareth areas.

4. The responsibility of the Christian world toward Palestine was well expressed by General Allenby in the Proclamation which he made on the occasion of the occupation of Jerusalem on the 11th December, 1917:—

“ Furthermore, since your City is regarded with affection by the adherents of three of the great religions of mankind, and its soil has been consecrated by the prayers and pilgrimages of multitudes of devout people of these three religions for many centuries, therefore do I make known to you that every sacred building, monument, holy spot, shrine, traditional site, endowment, pious bequest, or customary place of prayer, of whatsoever form of the three religions, will be maintained and protected according to the existing customs and beliefs of those to whose faiths they are sacred.”

5. The religious importance of Palestine to Moslems, Jews and Christians alike makes it improper to treat it either as an Arab State or as exclusively designated to the fulfilment of Jewish national aspirations. A solution of the Palestine problem must not only heal political rivalries of Jew and Arab, but must also safeguard its unique religious values.