

An outsider's view:

RELIGIOUS CHART AND DIALOGUE IN NABLUS

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I. Background

Centre for Interreligious Dialogue Stavanger (KdS) has from the start in 2012 assisted Stavanger Municipality in its relations with Stavanger's two official twin cities in the Middle East: Netanya in Israel and Nablus in Palestine. We have on two occasions participated in municipal delegations to the two cities, the last time in 2014.

I have as manager of KdS been on a short study visit to both cities in April 2017, where the main purpose has been to get an overview of the «religious scene» in the two cities, and especially local experiences with interfaith dialogue. This small study relating to Nablus will hopefully contribute to a broader understanding of the importance of and relations between religions in our twin city, thereby deepening the understanding of cultural and religious aspects of life in Nablus. A parallel study from Netanya is available.

The main article is in Norwegian. This English version has been presented to the participants in the interviews.

II. About Nablus

Nablus is situated north on the West Bank and competes with al-Khalil (Hebron) in the south on which is the biggest city after al-Quds (Jerusalem). Nablus has remains after original settlement dating back to

around 4500 BC. Just southeast of present day Nablus, the ancient city **Shechem** was situated, which was a political and religious centre in Canaan, and which is referred to many places in the Bible. Here we find the Tomb of Joseph and Jacob's Well, both between Shechem and village Sykar (in Arabic: Askar). The Romans expanded city building west of Shechem and gave it the name *Flavia Neapolis* in year 72 AC. 'Nablus' is the Arabic form of the Greek 'Neapolis' – meaning 'the new city'.

The great mosque in the centre of Nablus was previously a church, the Basilica of Justinian, but was reconstructed as a mosque after Salah Eddin conquered the city from the Crusaders in 1187.

The city was occupied by Israel during the Six Day War of 1967.

Present day Nablus has around 200 000 inhabitants, including more than 30 000 refugees from Israel in 1948, living in four refugee camps.

Nablus is predominantly a Moslem city – more than 99% of the population are Moslems. In addition, we find two other religions in Nablus with a long historic presence in the city: Around 400 Samaritans, going back to the eighth century BC, and 500 Christians. The Christian have been here since Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well almost two thousand years ago.

III. Moslems

Abu Islam is perhaps the most influential Moslem leader in Nablus. I made an interview with him already in 1990 for our Twin City Magazine, and he met our bishop Erling with a large group of church ministers from the Stavanger diocese in 2013, where he participated in a dialogue session together with Christians and Samaritans at Jacob's Well in Nablus.

Most *Nabulsis* (inhabitants of Nablus) are Moslems. In addition, around 700 of the inhabitants are Christians and around 400 are Samaritans. Originally, there was also a Jewish congregation in Nablus. Through the history of Palestine there were a Palestinian Jewish community integrated in our societies, in many towns and cities, including Nablus.

The Zionist endeavour to create a separate Jewish state based on immigration unfortunately created problems. After disturbances and violence in 1929, which among other things resulted in a massacre of Jews in Hebron, the Jews in Nablus and many other cities, towns and villages moved out. Unfortunately we therefore lost one of the four historic religions in Nablus».



I - Abu Islam: my host in Nablus

The main problem here is not frictions between religious groups. Here, we are still proud over the good relations between Moslems, Christians and Samaritans. The main problem we experience is American and European politics in this area of the world, with a one-sided support for the state of Israel, and the lack of initiatives to end the illegal occupation and the extension of the illegal colonies».

The main values are common for religions, even if there are differences in teachings, religious practices and dogmatic. But these are details!

I am a religious human being and a Moslem since I was raised in a religious atmosphere influenced by Islam. Others were influenced by Samaritan or Christian faith. But still, we are all One. We are one people living in the same realities, the same occupation, the same daily challenges».

Nobody has the right to enforce his own belief on others. Force is not allowed in Islam. A baker and a doctor are different and have different tasks, but they are both created by the same God. Different background and experiences create differences in faith and thinking. But still, it is what we can contribute with together which is the important thing. God does not separate us».

IV. Samaritans

There are only around 800 Samaritans living today, half of them here on the Gerizim Mountain above Nablus, and the rest living in Holon in Israel. They have all Israeli citizenship and have had the right to carry Israeli passports since 1967. The PLO has also secured the Samaritans representation in the

PNC (Palestinian National Council).and a seat in the legislative body PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council).

After the downfall of the twelve-tribe kingdom of David and his son Salomon in 920 BC, Jerusalem became the centre in Judah (the two-tribe kingdom), while Sebastia and Gerizim became the centre in the kingdom known as 'Israel' (the ten-tribe kingdom). Juda and Jerusalem was in the course of history the starting point of what we know as Judaism.

In 722 BC, the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, and large parts of the people were forced into exile, - while other people were forcefully transferred to Israel. This is the starting point for animosity and strife between Jews and Samaritans, where the Jews considered the Samaritans as heretics and 'unclean' (ref: descriptions of this in parts of the New Testament).

Today the Samaritans in Nablus have a synagogue both in the centre of the city, as well as on the top of the Gerizim Mountain. They consider only the Pentateuch as their Holy Scripture: «We are so few, so we don't need more than the books of Moses!», as one Samaritan told me. The children are taught Arabic as their daily language, as well as the ancient Hebrew, which is the language of prayer and liturgy.



2 – Prayers I attended with the Samaritans

Husney Wasef is a Samaritan priest, an author and manager of the Samaritan museum on the top of the holy mountain.

We live together – in a broad popular community with different religions.

We Samaritans are Nabulsi (inhabitants of Nablus) – but not

Palestinians. And we are Israelites, not Israelis. ('Israelites' is the term used for inhabitants of the ancient Israel, while 'Israelis' is the term used for inhabitants of the present state of Israel.)



3 Samaritan priest Husney Wasef

Some say that we moved up from the city of Nablus due to pressure from the Moslems. That is not true. We have always lived both in the city and on our holy mountain Gerizim. During the first Intifada most of us moved up to the mountain due to the fighting and unrest in the city between the Palestinians and the Israeli occupation force.

We all work in Nablus, we attend each other's feasts and celebrations and ceremonies. In Nablus, we have a strong tradition of supporting each other and being proud of the diversity between Moslems, Christians and Samaritans. We share good days as well as bad days».

In the Oslo 2 – accord, the parties divided the West Bank in A-, B- and C-areas: In the A-areas there is a form of self-determination including security, in the B-areas the Israeli occupation authorities maintain security directly, while they keep full control of both security and civil matters in the C-areas, which contain more than 60% of the West Bank. The original aim that the A-areas gradually would expand to all of the West Bank has not been carried out.

The occupation authorities does not like this shared community, and they try to break it up. They have made our holy mountain to a C-area. We consider this to be a criminal act. And they prevent especially Moslems from participating in our ceremonies.

We have been here for 3 500 years!

We are 'the good Samaritan' known from the Bible. Jesus met the Samaritan woman at our well 2000 years ago, here in Nablus. And now they deny us access to our holy mountain and they are making archaeological excavations on our holy grounds. We are only allowed access three times a year: At Easter, Pentecost and the Fiest of the Tabernacle. This is discrimination and a criminal act».

We Samaritans long for peace and reconciliation. To achieve this, we need two states. Occupation and illegal colonies does not bring peace. We are disappointed by the USA and Europe. They choose their own weapon industry before peace and reconciliation».

V. Christians

Meeting Abuna Leonius from the Greek Orthodox congregation, Aziz Ibrahim from St Philip – the Anglican congregation and Abuna Yousef from the Greek Catholic congregation



4 - Christian priests in Nablus

There are four different denominations and the eight churches in Nablus: The Greek Catholic congregation has one church in Rafidiya, with around 30 members. Abuna Yousef (to the right) has been a priest in Nablus since the seventies, and he is 77 years old.

The Greek Orthodox congregation consists of four churches: One in the Old City, two churches in Rafidiya – one new and one built around 1500 - and the church at Jacob's Well, where his colleague Abuna Stinius is priest, architect, church builder and iconography.

Abuna Leonius (to the left) has been here for 3 years, and is a Greek national raised in Jerusalem where he also received his theological education. The Episcopal (Anglican) congregation has two churches in Nablus: St Philip in the Old City and a new church in Rafidiya. Aziz Ibrahim has been a priest in Nablus for 10 years.

In addition there is a Roman-Catholic congregation in Nablus with their church in Rafidiya.

✓ **Aziz Ibrahim:**

There are now around 600 Christians in Nablus. The last 40 years we have experienced that very many have left. Previously they left for western countries; now most of those who leave go to Jordan.

✓ **Abuna Yousef:**

In 1984 there were around 2 500 Christians in Nablus. At that time we had 150 members in our congregation – now we are only 30. The main reason for the exodus is related to the political situation: Occupation, intifada and violence. In addition, unemployment plays a significant part. When young people between 20 and 35 cannot find work, they choose to emigrate. Many Moslems leave too, especially to Jordan, but the Christian families are smaller and more mobile, so they often find it easier to emigrate.

VI. Cooperation and tolerance:
«The Church meeting the Mosque»

✓ **Abuna Yousef:**

The big picture in Nablus and Palestine is mutual respect and tolerance between Christians and Moslems – in Nablus also including the Samaritans. But the regional situation often plays a role: During the Balkan war in 1860-62 strong anti-Christian feelings occurred, even in Nablus, and many Christians at the time chose to emigrate.

✓ **Abuna Leonius:**

Presently we have some problems in the schools regarding harassment of Christian pupils. Even though very few kids are involved, it creates some bad feelings.

1) Aziz Ibrahim:

Of course we can find individuals and small groups who are more extreme among the Moslems. We find this in all majority communities all over the world. Again, the big picture is this:

- 90% of the Moslems in Nablus are OK and accept us with no problems, even if they are not personally committed to or engaged in dialogue activities.
- 5% are fundamentalists and have a low tolerance of others.
- And 5% are very open minded and committed to activities of dialogue and cooperation. They are actively promoting good relations.

The last years we have actively and systematically worked to reach the 90%. Together with Abu Islam (interview below), we have organized a **permanent dialogue forum** between Christians and Moslems. We meet here in St Philip Church once a month. This forum is led by Abu Islam and Aziz Ibrahim. The forum is for priests and imams, and it is not unusual that 40 or 50 imams participate. While maybe 1 of 40 imams decline to participate in a church with the cross on the roof, - all the others attend. I believe this is a representative picture of the relations between Moslems and Christians in Nablus».

Outside of Nablus the situation can be more complicated. There are a few villages dominated by Hamas where it is not safe for Christians. But most of the Hamas people are also tolerant and create no problems for us. Some time ago we organized a common bus trip to Bethlehem and Hebron, with forty imams and two priests in the bus! Such common activities are important to build trust, knowledge and friendship.

2) **Aziz Ibrahim:**

Our dialogue is not on dogmatic issues. We acknowledge that we have differences in our faith, and respect each other's right to their own beliefs. In our dialogue, we deal with common challenges, difficult individual issues that might occur, and our common resistance against the occupation based on the principles of non-violence.

An example of such joint resistance: A small village outside Nablus is surrounded by illegal colonies. In cooperation the World Council of Churches and their program for protective presence, we launched a joint campaign between Moslems and Christians to protect the village and stop the harassment from the settlers. After some good media reports the harassment stopped – at least for a period.

3) **Abuna Leonius:**

The issues for dialogue in our meetings deal with different topics:

- a) School challenges
- b) Joint campaigns against the occupation
- c) Non-violence
- d) Friendship and mutual respect.

4) **Abuna Yousef:**

Our dialogue is an important contribution to solve problems even outside Nablus. Some years back there were some Moslem groups in Israel who made strong statements against Christians, as a reaction against an American pastor who burned the Quran on camera. I was contacted by my colleague in Nazareth, and discussed the problem with several imams in Nablus, asking them to try to influence their colleagues in Nazareth. They managed to stop these negative manifestations. Without mutual trust and good relations, such efforts to solve difficult situations would not have been possible.

Media operates often very destructive with 'fake news': In 1967 the BBC reported 'ethnic cleansing in the Christian quarter in Nablus'. First of all: There is no Christian quarter in Nablus. We live side by side. Secondly, there were no conflicts or unrest at all between Christians and Moslems. We were both victims of the Israeli invasion and occupation of the West Bank in 1967. Most probably, the Israeli propaganda apparatus planted such fake news to create an image that the Israeli occupation 'helped' the Christians. This is classic 'divide-and-rule'-tactics that occupation forces through history have performed.

The Americans are promoting a crusade, and we have to pay the price. They try to split Moslems and Christians. Our dialogue efforts are extremely important to push back such destructive force.

5) **Aziz Ibrahim:**

A last example of good dialogue through practical action is celebratiung *Day of the Light*.

Every Saturday before Easter morning we celebrate "Day of the Light". We light candles in the Holy Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem (the Holy Sepulchre). Then we bring this flame with us and light it in all our eight churches in Nablus. In this ceremony many participate: Moslem leaders, the mayor and the governor, imams and many other non-Christians, who actively perform the lighting of our candles. This is interfaith dialogue in practice»!

VII. **Wahhabism: *The ideology of the desert***

The vast majority of Moslems are decent and open minded people who recognize and accept the faith of others. But the dangerous and chaotic situation in the region has also a local contagious effect, even though it is small.

There are individuals in Nablus that have been influenced by wahhabism. Wahhabism is the ideology of the desert and is the leading version of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism does not recognize other believers, not even other Moslems, who are described as infidels. This fascist ideology is clearly in contradiction with Islam.

Media create many problems between us, they love split and divisions. The Palestinian Government and the Minister of Religion have been trying to stop this tendency by claiming that “Everything is OK!” But it is not that simple.

Wahhabism is one of the faces of the Salafists. Wahhabism and Salafism have very little support among the Moslems of Palestine. But there are some small and isolated groups who are trying to create problems. My concern is that we must stop this tendency in birth. Wahhabism is a cancer that should not be allowed to grow. But we must deal with them through words and enlightenment, not by violence.

VIII. **Interreligious cooperation**

Moslems and Christians, Samaritans and Jews are all called by the One God to follow the basic ethical values that are common to us. As the Holy Quran says: “*No one is a true believer before he wishes for his brother the same that he wishes for himself.*” The same principles apply also for other religions. The revelation from God for all of us is love and justice».

In Nablus, we have established a common dialogue forum for Christians and Moslems. In this, I cooperate closely with Aziz Ibrahim from the Anglican congregation. It is important that we meet. The Christians are naturally worried about what is happening in the region, especially concerning the tragic development in Syria and Iraq. Interreligious dialogue in this context is very important.

We visit each other during our feasts: Moslems greet the Christians in their Easter celebrations now coming up. We participate as guests in the churches, in the same way that Christians and Samaritans are guests in our mosques during Eid and other religious celebrations. So we have very good relations between us.

Abu Islam also participates in interfaith dialogue on a national level, especially between Christians and Muslims.

Al-Liqa' ("Encounter") is a very important forum for dialogue and cooperation. Al-Liqa' - is an interfaith dialogue centre in Bethlehem established in the eighties by the Greek Catholic philosopher Gerios Khoury. I have written several articles in the magazine "al-Liqa' Journal". This interfaith dialogue is based on the principle that we are one people under one God. We experience the same occupation. Therefore, unity especially between Christians and Moslems is decisively important.

IX. On politics

I belong to Fateh and I have been working for a peaceful solution based on two independent states. But I am disappointed by the development, also within Fateh. We need to develop a more creative ideology, not just repeating slogans from the past.

The setbacks for the peace process and especially the devastating growth of settler activities have led to too many destructive ideas, and opens up for violence. Violence leads nowhere. All believers must be against violence».

The Israelis have two problems:

- 1) First of all, there are 6.5 million Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. And we will not be driven away – not again. Even though many Palestinians emigrate, the Palestinian population is growing steadily.

- 2) Secondly, the immigration to Israel has stopped. There are more Jews in the USA than in Israel, and they prefer to drive

Cadillac in New York instead of Merkava (Israeli tank) in Palestine. If the Israelis consider this carefully, they will find that they need a Palestinian state just as much as the Palestinian people need their state

X. Reflections Nablus

✓ *Political dialogue versus interfaith dialogue*

Whether in Palestine or in Israel, the term «dialogue» is first associated with politics: The so called 'Peace Process' and negotiations for a political solution between the two people. Many Israelis are still in favour of political dialogue and negotiations. Among the Palestinians, there is a more sceptical or hostile attitude to the political 'dialogue': They experience a need for concrete changes on the ground and an end of the occupation. While talks and dialogue and negotiations are on-going, Israel continues to build illegal colonies. When political dialogue replaces real changes, it becomes repressive.

Interfaith dialogue on the other hand has a strong support in Nablus.

In my conversation with Abu Islam, he regrets the fact that Nablus lost their fourth religion, which was an integrated part of the city's life and history: The Jewish community, who left Nablus after acts of violence and massacres in Hebron in the end of the twenties.

I recognize Abu Islam's attitude on this issue from many visits in Nablus and Palestine since 1984: The pride and joy, especially among Moslems, relating to the religious and cultural magnitude, - that the followers of several religions through history have lived together, side by side as good neighbours.

The interfaith dialogue, especially between Moslems and Christians, is very encouraging, and is much more stable and better organized than I was aware of before this study visit. On previous visits where religion and interfaith dialogue has been a topic, I usually met Moslems, Samaritans and Christians together. This time, I wanted to meet them separately, to

listen to nuances particularly from the smaller religious groups: The Samaritans and the Christians.

All those I interviewed, and especially the priests and Abu Islam, described the ‘big picture’: Good relations, cooperation, mutual respect, dialogue and unity as a people. At the same time, Abu Islam also contributed with critical remarks on a small tendency among some Moslems being influenced by Saudi Wahhabism. This concurs with some observations I made on the street: In the course of three days, I observed 8-10 women wearing niqab. Some years back, I only observed one or two, and in the eighties and nineties I never saw this.

It is important that Abu Islam commented on this small tendency and expressed his concern. At the same time, it is more important to underline and emphasise the big picture: Mutual respect, recognition and interfaith dialogue.

In Stavanger, Christian ministers and Moslem imams meet regularly four times a year. Our interfaith dialogue centre initiated this in 2016. It is remarkable that in Nablus – where the Christians constitute a much smaller portion of the inhabitants than the Moslems in Stavanger do – there have been regular sessions of interfaith dialogue for a much longer period of time, and with a much higher frequency. It is quite impressive to listen to the same description of these activities in separate meetings both from Abu Islam and from the Christian priests.

We can learn quite a lot from this local Nabulsi custom: That Christian churches invite Moslems and Samaritans to active participation by lighting candles at Easter, at *the Day of the Light*. They are not only guests, - they are what we might call “guest participants”. As one of the priests put it: “*This is interfaith dialogue in practice*”.

The interfaith dialogue centre in Stavanger and other places in Norway practice similar symbolic acts. Interfaith peace concerts and peace meals are examples of such a dialogue practice. Further down the road, it is important that such practices not only mobilize those with a special interest, but is integrated in the life of our churches, our mosques and the arenas of other religions and life stands.