

shoes to listen to Christian lectures.

Just over a fortnight later, on Jan. 11, 1984, suspected Jewish extremists stacked hymnals on a piano in a Christian prayer room in Jerusalem and set them afire. Also in the same week angry Jews protesting Christian proselytizing caused Beth Shalom, a Christian evangelical group, to withdraw its plans to build a multimillion-dollar hotel in Jerusalem. Beth Shalom took its action after about 150 Jews showed up at a city council meeting with placards reading "You can't buy me" and "I didn't immigrate to live next door to missionaries." A leader of the protest, Rabbi Moshe Berlinger, compared Christian missionaries to Trojan horses.

Jewish infringements on Christian rights became so bad by 1990 that on Dec. 20 the leaders of Christian churches in Jerusalem took the extraordinary decision to restrict Christmas celebrations to protest "the continuing sad state of affairs in our land," including encroachment by Israel on traditional Christian institutions. Among concerns expressed by the patriarchs and heads of churches were attempts by Jewish settlers to move into the Old City and an "erosion of the traditional rights and centuries-old privileges of the churches," including imposition by Israel of municipal and state taxes on the churches.

The statement added: "We express our deep concern over new problems confronting the local church. They interfere with the proper functioning of our religious institutions, and we call upon the civil authorities in the country to safeguard our historic rights and status honored by all governments."

Anti-Christian prejudice helps account for the fact that the number of Christian Palestinians in all of former Palestine had dwindled to only 50,000 in 1995. They no longer were a major presence in either Jerusalem or Ramallah, and they were fast losing their majority status in Bethlehem.

When Israel was established in 1948, the Palestinian Christian community had numbered 200,000, compared to roughly 600,000 Jews in Palestine at the time. Now the Christians are not even one percent of the population of Israel/Palestine. Of today's estimated total 400,000 Christian Palestinians, most now are living in their own diaspora, mainly in the Americas.

Excerpted from *Fifty Years of Israel*

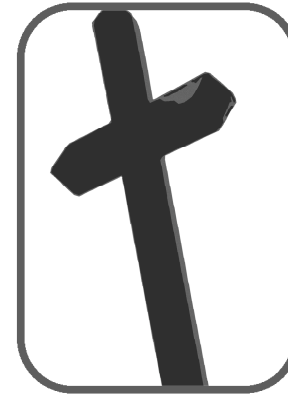
### About Donald Neff

Donald Neff has been a journalist for forty years. He spent 16 years in service for *Time Magazine* and is a regular contributor to *Middle East International* and the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. He has written five excellent books on the Middle East.

[www.IfAmericansKnew.org](http://www.IfAmericansKnew.org)

PO Box 75845, Washington, DC 20013-5845 • [contact@IfAmericansKnew.org](mailto:contact@IfAmericansKnew.org) • 202-543-2044

## Christians Discriminated Against by Israel



Donald Neff

Former *Time Magazine* Bureau Chief

On Dec. 29, 1977, Christians in Israel and the occupied territories protested a new law passed by the Israeli parliament making it illegal for missionaries to proselytize Jews. Protestant churches charged that the law had been "hastily pushed through parliament during the Christmas period when Christians were busily engaged in preparing for and celebrating their major festival." The law made missionaries liable to five years' imprisonment for attempting to persuade people to change their religion, and three years' imprisonment for any Jew who converted. The United Christian Council complained that the law could be "misused in restricting religious freedom in Israel."

Nonetheless, it came into force on April 1, 1978, prohibiting the offering of "material inducement" for a person to change his religion. A material inducement could be something as minor as the giving of a Bible. Although the Likud government of Menachem Begin assured the Christian community that the law applied equally to all religions and did not specifically mention Christians, the United Christian Council of Israel charged that it was biased and aimed specifically at Christians since only Christians openly proselytized. Council representatives also cited anti-Christian speeches made in the parliament during debate on the law. Parliament member Binyamin Halevy had called missionaries "a cancer in the body of the nation."

The next year Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, considered a political moderate, issued

a religious ruling that copies of the New Testament should be torn out of any edition of a Bible owned by a Jew. Israeli scholar Yehoshafat Harkabi wrote that he was disturbed by "these manifestations of hostility-the designation of Christians as idolaters, the demand to invoke the 'resident alien' ordinances, and the burning of the New Testament." Observed Harkabi: "Outside of the Land of Israel Jews never dared behave in this fashion. Has independence made the Jews take leave of their senses?"

Desecration of Christian property and churches-arson, window breaking, burning of the New Testament-had long marred relations between the two communities. A small but fanatical group of Jews wanted no Christians, whom they considered fallen Jews, in Israel. This virulent strain of prejudice had been present since before the Jewish state was founded.

For instance, after the capture by Jewish forces of Jaffa on May 13, 1948, two days before Israel's birth, there was desecration of Christian churches. Father Deleque, a Catholic priest, reported: "Jewish soldiers broke down the doors of my church and robbed many precious and sacred objects. Then they threw the statues of Christ down into a nearby garden." He added that Jewish leaders had reassured that religious buildings would be respected, "but their deeds do not correspond to their words."

On May 31, 1948, a group of Christian leaders comprising the Christian Union of Palestine publicly complained that Jewish forces had used 10 Christian churches and humanitarian institutions in Jerusalem as military bases and otherwise desecrated them. They added that a total of 14 churches had suffered shell damage, which killed three priests and made casualties of more than 100 women and children.

The group's statement said Arab forces had abided by their promise to respect Christian institutions, but that the Jews had forcefully occupied Christian structures and been indiscriminate in shelling churches. It said, among other charges, that "many children were killed or wounded" by Jewish shells on the Convent of Orthodox Copts on May 19, 23 and 24; that eight refugees were killed and about 120 wounded at the Orthodox Armenian Convent at some unstated date; and that Father Pierre Somi, secretary to the Bishop, had been killed and two wounded at the Orthodox Syrian Church of St. Mark on May 16.

Churches were again desecrated during the 1967 war when Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, completing the occupation of all of Palestine. On July 21, 1967, the Reverend James L. Kelso, a former moderator of the United Presbyterian Church and long-time resident in Palestine, complained of extensive damage to churches adding: "So significant was this third Jewish war against the Arabs that one of the finest missionaries of the Near East called it 'perhaps the most serious setback that Christendom has had since the fall of Constantinople in 1453.'"

Kelso continued: "How did Israel respect church property in the fighting...? They shot up the Episcopal Cathedral [in Jerusalem], just as they had done in 1948. They smashed down the Episcopal school for boys...The Israelis wrecked and looted the YMCA...They wrecked the big Lutheran hospital...The Lutheran center for cripples also suffered..."

Nancy Nolan, wife of a physician at the American University Hospital in Beirut, who was in Jerusalem during and after the fighting, charged that "while the Israeli authorities proclaim to the world that all religions will be respected and protected, and post notices identifying the Holy Places, Israeli soldiers and youths are throwing stink bombs in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

"The Church of St. Anne, who crypt marks the birthplace of the Virgin Mary, has been severely damaged and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem also was damaged. The wanton killing of the Warden of the Garden Tomb followed by the shooting into the tomb itself, in an attempt to kill the warden's wife, was another instance that we knew first-hand which illustrated the utter disregard shown by the occupation forces toward the Holy Places and the religious sensibilities of the people in Jordan and in the rest of the world."

"The desecration of churches...includes smoking in the churches, littering the churches, taking dogs inside and entering in inappropriate manner of dress. Behavior such as this cannot be construed other than as a direct insult to the whole Christian world."

Desecration has occurred not only in times of war. As recently as 1995, an Israeli soldier, Daniel Koren, 22, entered St. Anthony Catholic Church in Jaffa and went on a shooting rampage, firing more than 100 bullets in the altar and the cross above it but causing no injuries. Koren said his Judaic convictions forced him to destroy all physical images of God, and admitted that he had staged a prior attack in Jerusalem's Gethsemane Church.

Perhaps the worst outbreak of organized desecration of Christian institutions came on Sept. 10, 1963, when hundreds of ultra-orthodox Jews simultaneously attacked Christian missions in Jaffa, Haifa and Jerusalem. (One has to say "perhaps because reporting on this sensitive subject in the U.S. media has been so poor over the decades.) At any rate, the attacks were a concerted effort to intimidate Christians in Israel by a religious vigilante group called Hever Peelei Hamahane Hatorati, the Society of Activists of the Torah Camp. In an attack on the Church of Scotland school in Jaffa, Christian children were beaten and considerable damage was caused to the school by at least 200 rampaging Jews.

Other attacks occurred at two nearby church schools, the Greek Catholic missionary school of St. Joseph and a Christian Brothers school. In Jerusalem, attacks occurred at the St. Joseph convent and the Finnish Lutheran mission school. In Haifa, the American-European Beth El Messianic Mission Children's Hostel and School was attacked. No serious damage occurred in any of the attacks except at the Scotland school. More than 100 Jews were convicted in the attacks, none of them receiving more than small fines and suspended sentences.

The first half of the 1980s, with Likud governments in control, was a particularly active period for Jewish bigots. On Oct. 8, 1982, the Baptist Church in Jerusalem was burned down. Kerosene had been sprinkled on the church's wooden chapel, constructed in 1933. Although no one was ever charged in the arson, the Baptist Center's bookstore had been vandalized a dozen times in previous years, and Jews were suspected. When the Baptists sought to rebuild the church, Jews demonstrated against the project and the Jewish district planning commission refused to grant a building permit. In 1985, the Israeli Supreme Court advised the Baptists to leave the all-Jewish area.

On Christmas Day in 1983, a hotel in Tiberias where Christians held meetings was set afire, the latest in a series of attacks on a small group of about 50 Christians. Two Jews were arrested in the arson incident. Other attacks included stones thrown through windows at the hotel while the group was meeting and break-ins at the homes of members of the group. The anti-missionary group Yad Le'Achim complained that Christian missionaries were offering money, clothes, jewelry and tennis