A ‘City whose Gates are Always Open’?
Visions for Jerusalem in Orthodox Christianity

On 22 January 1988, one month after the eruption of violence in Gaza and the West Bank, Jerusalem witnessed an unprecedented act of Christian solidarity: the heads of local churches issued what was to become the first of many joint statements calling on all leaders and people in authority to end hostilities and facilitate the cause of peace. The first signatory to this document, as well as to all subsequent joint statements, was the Greek Orthodox patriarch (May 2010: 13, 20–22). The Holy Places and the Holy City became the focus of the *1994 Memorandum of Their Beatitudes the Patriarchs and the Heads of Christian Communities in Jerusalem on the Significance of Jerusalem for Christians*—a key document in which the bishops articulated their vision for Jerusalem as a city, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, ‘whose gates are always open’ (§6, Ibid.: 50; see Isa. 60:11). In this, the heads of churches went beyond the obvious call to speak for the rights of their own Christian flock. Most recently, in a statement of 14 May 2021, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos III condemned the violence at the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood affirming the rights of the adherents of all three Abrahamic faiths to their Holy Places (WCC 2021). The resilience with which this new vision for Jerusalem is preached is remarkable, especially given the context in which Christians in the Holy Land, as a minority within the Palestinian minority, have to operate. In a brief summary for 2020, the *Report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People* to the UN speaks of ongoing

> arbitrary arrests, discrimination, administrative detention, including of children, restrictions on freedom of movement, violations of the right to worship, restrictions on access to education and health care and killings by Israeli security forces in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem (§9, at www.un.org).

There is here an obvious tension between the historical ‘is’ and the prophetic ‘ought to be’, between the Jerusalem-divided-by-a-wall and the Holy City ‘whose gates are always open’. Taking a stance against the injustices of the first, it is to the potential in the second that the present text will be dedicated. It will provide a platform enabling the voices of local Christians to be heard (see May 2010 for the period 1988–2008). In order to show both what is traditional and what is new in their vision for a Jerusalem-after-the-end-of-Israeli-Palestinian-hostilities we will then turn to the phenomenon known as *hierotopy*—a special

case of which is the setting up of 'new Jerusalem' sites across the Christian world (Lidov 2009). Here we will examine the efforts on the part of three centres in the Orthodox world—in Byzantium, Georgia and Russia—to recreate the Holy Places and to appropriate some of Jerusalem's sacred attributes for their own historical contexts.

I.

Jerusalem as both a troubled earthly city and an enduring icon of messianic peace, a place which does not exclude, but gathers—despite all divisions, a powerful symbol of divine hospitality—this vision is one which Christians in the Holy Land evidently share, deferring, as they have been in promoting it over the course of the past 33 years, to the leadership of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. If in earlier centuries they had seen themselves in a more Christian-focused sense as the 'Guardians of the Tomb of Christ' now—without rejecting the earlier identification—they speak as defenders also of the 'unique pluralistic character' of Jerusalem itself (Easter Message, 23 March 1991; May 2010: 35). According to the *1994 Memorandum*, the city's vocation is to promote 'reconciliation and harmony among people, whether citizens, pilgrims or visitors' (§2, May 2010: 48). For Christians specifically, Jerusalem holds a twofold significance. As the 'Holy City with Holy Places', it provides them with a 'link with the history of salvation fulfilled in and through Christ'. Furthermore, it has 'a community of Christians that have been living there continually' since apostolic times (§10, Ibid.: 51). These statements emphasise the local nature of the communities. It is their voices that we hear lamenting that the issue of who is in control of the city has 'become a source of conflict and disharmony'. Being at 'the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab disputes', the situation of Jerusalem has become 'unenviable' and 'scandalizes many' (§2, Ibid.: 48). Thus, the *1994 Memorandum* speaks of Jesus weeping over the earthly Jerusalem (Luke 19:42), because its people have 'completely lost sight of the path to peace'. The heavenly Jerusalem, in contrast, is a 'new creation' (Rev. 3:12, 21:2), the city which is 'from above' and is 'free' (Gal. 4:26, cf. Heb. 12:22). When it is revealed, 'God will wipe away all tears' (Rev. 21:4) (§6, Ibid.: 50). The *1994 Memorandum* explains the relationship between the two cities as follows: 'The earthly Jerusalem, in the Christian tradition, prefigures the heavenly Jerusalem as "the vision of peace"' (§7, Ibid.: 51).

One is struck by the fact that Christian communities which remain divided for theological and historical reasons here speak with one voice. Furthermore, there is the emphasis on peace and reconciliation also with Jews and Muslims, for whom the Christian bishops are eager to secure the rights of human dignity and religious freedoms as for their own communities:

> Christians declare themselves disposed to search with Jews and Muslims for a mutually respectful application of these rights and for a harmonious coexistence, in the perspective of the universal spiritual vocation of Jerusalem. (Ibid.: 53)

The *1994 Memorandum* is remarkable with its call for preserving the religious diversity in the earthly city—Old Jerusalem—as an abiding symbol of peace and justice, which are attributes of the Jerusalem-to-come, the New Jerusalem. This is because,

> …every exclusivity is against the prophetic character of Jerusalem… The experience of history teaches us that in order for Jerusalem to be a city of peace, it cannot belong exclusively to one people or to only one religion. Jerusalem should be open to all, shared by all. Those who govern the city should make it 'the capital of humankind' this universal vision of Jerusalem would help those who exercise power there to open it to others who also are fondly attached to it and to accept sharing it with them. (Ibid.: 49–50)

Jerusalem—here designated as 'capital of humankind'—thus embodies a political project of local independence. The protected—because endangered—status of the city is presented as divinely sanctioned. Jerusalem, concludes the document, is a 'symbol and a promise of the presence of God'. With the express aim of securing for Jews, Christians and Muslims the right to be 'at home' and 'at peace with one another', the bishops appeal to the international community to safeguard Jerusalem's character as 'an open city that transcends local, regional or world political troubles' (Ibid.: 53).

Placed in the context of the history of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which claims unbroken continuity with the apostolic church, this vision for Jerusalem as an 'open city' must be seen as inaugurating an important change. As is well known, in the centuries that followed the destruction of the Temple by the Romans until the Muslim conquest of the city—i.e. while the city was in Roman and Byzantine control—Jews were, in the best of cases, only allowed to visit but never again to settle. Their return, and the possibility to rebuild the Temple, entered the Roman agenda only once, during the brief reign of the emperor Julian (361–63 CE). In all other cases, from Constantine onwards, the building of the church of the *Anastasis* opposite the ruins of the Temple was meant to symbolize the demise of Judaism—and thus of king David's (old) Jerusalem. As the historian Eusebius put it, with the coming of the new David, i.e. Constantine, Christians obtained what the prophets had longed for—a 'fresh new Jerusalem' (*Life of Constantine* III, 33. tr. Cameron & Hall,

135), which Jews could no longer call their home. Eusebius was following the line established by earlier apologists such as Melito in the second century who claimed that 'the Jerusalem below was precious, but it is worthless now because of the Jerusalem above' (*On Pascha* 45, tr. Hall. Oxford 1979, cited in Pahlitzsch 2011: 240). The issue is left out of the *1994 Memorandum*. One Greek scholar has spoken, with relief, that 'today the attitude of Orthodox thought toward Jerusalem and the Jews has completely changed' (Karavidopoulos 1988: 192). In the *1994 Memorandum,* this is taken for granted and the appeal is made directly to the period after the Muslim conquest. The reference is to the 'historical *firmans* of the Ottoman emperors' and the 'rights of property ownership, custody and worship' defined in them (May 2010: 52). This is the Status Quo agreement between the faith communities with regard to sharing the Holy Places, for which the bishops seek recognition and respect from the Israeli state and the international community (Roussos 1995).

In contrast to the exclusion of Jews, one could speak here of continuity in terms of sharing with Islam. From the period before the crusades, archaeologists have established shared use of church buildings in Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Verstegen 2019). To this practice testifies also the mosque built over the sixth-century refectory in St Catherine's monastery on Mt Sinai where the minaret was placed opposite the bell tower. This phenomenon shocked many travellers who came from Western lands where such practice was unknown. The significance of such arrangements has been highlighted recently with reference to the Saidnaiya Greek Orthodox convent near Damascus:

> The thaumaturgic icon of Our Lady of Saidnaiya has for more than eight hundred years met with a response which cuts across the confessional divisions within Christianity, and even across the deeper divisions between Christianity and Islam. It has brought together in a common religious activity groups of people normally antagonistic to each other: the Muslim subjects of Saladin and the crusaders against whom they fought…; Latin Catholic clergy and the Orthodox clergy whom they considered schismatic; and the many varieties of oriental Christians whose relations with each other and with the Orthodox were often stormy. Moreover, control of the shrine has never been a contentious issue. It is a not inconsiderable achievement. (Hamilton 2000: 215)

The vision for a new Jerusalem 'shared by all' can thus be linked in part to lived experience—past and present—in the Holy Land. At the same time, however, it must be seen

as something radically new. Positive assessments of religious co-existence, such as the one quoted above, lend credibility to the voices we hear in the *1994 Memorandum* and other joint statements. Their historical accuracy, however, can be fully accepted in only one sense: they record how Christians in the Holy Land today imagine their future while at the same time looking back—selectively as we have seen—for historical precedent. Thus, there can be no question of reviving the myth of interfaith utopia (in agreement with Cohen 2008). No local Christian community can afford to do so. The appeal to the Status Quo and the historical *firmans* of Ottoman emperors acknowledges the lower level of interfaith conflict when the city was in Muslim control. This, however, does not invalidate the fact that the calendars of each church commemorate martyrs from this period as well; Greek Orthodox, Copts or Armenians will not forget their names. The phenomenon of sharing individual sites, for what must have been and remains a segregated form of religious worship, is also quite different from the currently espoused vision of sharing—together—the Holy City. The factors which have brought about the sense of solidarity to which the joint statements bear testimony are also unprecedented in their political and sociological complexity. Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, as the oppressed minority feel strongly that they share a common identity as they struggle to survive in the face of an aggressive Israeli-Jewish majority. Such identity fits well with the popular narrative defining Palestinians as the people of the land who, regardless of religious affiliation, throughout history have had to resist foreign oppression (Mana 2012: 179). Monitoring closely, from distant headquarters, is the international community. All this has created the urgency for local Christians to act—together—to do what they can to secure a vision for their own future. The language used by the Christian leaders—and its ineffectiveness in terms of the *Realpolitik*—mirrors that of the UN, whose resolutions remain ineffective on the ground. As the *Kairos Palestine Document* (14th December 2009) put it: ‘in the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope’ (§10, WCC 2021).

The articulation of a new vision, however, does not mean a complete break with tradition—something impossible at Jerusalem. Rather, we can say that the new is also traditional to the extent to which it includes elements of the past (the experience, for example, of shared religious sites). Novel is the total rejection of exclusive political or religious claims over the Holy City. In a much more fundamental sense, this change, too, must be seen as part of an ongoing process of re-conceptualizing Jerusalem, which has been taking place throughout Christian history.

II.

One key aspect of the sanctity of Jerusalem, which the joint statements of the heads of churches seek to protect, is access to the Holy Places. Hence the commitment in the *1994 Memorandum* to safeguarding the local communities' rights of 'ownership and custody'. Thus, the text continues, Christians of the 'entire world, Western or Eastern, should have the right to come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem' (May 2010: 52). Here there is historical continuity but there is also an issue which has been left out of focus: the exporting of relics which accompanied the growth of pilgrimage to the Holy Land from the fourth century CE onwards.

Very soon, Constantinople would boast more relics than any other place in the Christian world acquiring the reputation of being not just the New Rome, or the city of the Mother of God, but also a New Jerusalem (Klein 2006). The first title it owed to its political prominence, the second and the third—to the extraordinarily rich collection of relics eventually amounting to more than 3,600 items from at least 476 different saints (Ousterhout 2004: 4). Chief among these were the relics associated with Christ's life and death—the crown of thorns, large pieces of the cross, two nails from the crucifixion, the lance that pierced his side, an ampulla with Christ's blood, the purple robe of derision, the reed with which a sponge with vinegar was offered, his sandals, and the *mandylion* imprint of his face—the majority of which were kept in the church of the Virgin of the Pharos located inside the imperial palace (Pahlitzsch 2011: 246). Further relics of Christ's closest associates were also gathered in the city: St John the Baptist, St Lazarus the Friend of Christ, and above all—the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Thus, on the eve of the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade (1204 CE), the city was hailed as 'Jerusalem, Tiberias, Nazareth, Mount Tabor, Bethany and Bethlehem' (Nikolaos Mesarites, *Epitaphios* §13, tr. Angold 2017: 152). It was as if, with their relics, the Virgin Mary 'Theotokos', Christ and the saints had all arrived to confirm the people of Byzantium as the New Israel, and Constantinople as Jerusalem—the main stage of divine action in the world. Housed in the palace, the main dominical relics were beyond the reach of the population except on special feast days when they were exhibited for public veneration. This arrangement further contributed to the sacralisation of the rule of the emperor providing what has been interpreted as 'symbolic identification' of the imperial palace as heavenly Jerusalem itself (Carlie 2006).

The connection with Jerusalem looks very different if we examine it not from the centre but from the periphery of the Christian *oikoumene*. At Mtskheta, the capital of medieval Georgia, it was the mantle of Christ which was believed to be the country's most sacred relic. Because

of it, the city became known as Georgia's Jerusalem. This was understood both as signifying the presence of the Heavenly Jerusalem and as a copy of the earthly one, with its Golgotha at the Mtskheta Holy Cross Monastery, the Jordan at the Mtkvari River as well as Gethsemane, Bethlehem, Bethany, Tabor, the Church of St Stephen the Protomartyr and even a small chapel called 'Antioch' (Chkhartishvili 2009). Historical scrutiny cannot confirm the tradition of the arrival at Mtskheta of the mantle of Christ with a Georgian Jew who had been in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion. Only subsequent accounts of miracles testify to the relic's presence under the so-called 'Living' or 'Life-giving pillar' from which the imposing eleventh-century Sveti-Tskhoveli cathedral at Mtskheta takes the name. What is certain is that soon after the conversion of the country, Georgian monks became a constant presence in the Holy Land. Witness to this are some of the earliest known Georgian inscriptions discovered in Palestine (dating from the mid-sixth century, Braund 1995: 285). Such Jerusalem connections—real as well as legendary—played a major role in the formation of Georgian identity, of which the complex at Mtskheta was to become a key element—emancipating themselves from the jurisdiction of Antioch and circumventing the influence of their neighbour Armenia.

By contrast, the gathering of relics in Constantinople did not result in duplicating the Jerusalem Holy Places on the Bosphorus. The emperor Justinian may well have thought to have surpassed Solomon with the building the magnificent Hagia Sophia but, nevertheless, no attempt was ever made to recreate in Constantinople the Tomb of Christ or other of the major Jerusalem sites. The capital of the empire was politically and religiously secure in its identity as New Rome. The importing of relics cannot be viewed as somehow putting it in a position of needing legitimation from distant Jerusalem, as appears to have been more the case with Georgia (Pahlitzsch 2011: 253–54).

The subject of Christian-Jewish relations provides further basis for comparison between the new Jerusalems on the Bosphorus and at Mtskheta. While in Roman and Byzantine law Jews were accorded legal protection, they were denied settlement in Jerusalem, and there were also attempts at forced mass conversions (De Lange 2018). The Georgians, in contrast—with their cherished account of a Jew bringing the mantle of Christ—have retained a uniquely positive image of key members of their ancient Jewish community being among the first to convert to Christianity, well before the fourth century. Tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions at Mtskheta confirm Jewish presence in the city from the third until the fifth century (Mgaloblishvili & Gagoshidze 1998). These Jews had evidently kept their religion and

identity. Thus, as opposed to the case at Jerusalem in Palestine, Jews were present and remained welcome in Mtskheta well after the Christianisation of the country. Researchers today accept the view that hatred of Jews was not a feature of medieval Georgian society. Concurring with previous assessments of the situation prior to Georgia's becoming part of the Russian empire and church (in 1801 CE), one of the few Jewish scholars who has researched the topic confirms that 'the absence of evidence regarding church incitement against the Jews, or religious persecutions, expulsions or riots, is proof of the tolerant attitude of the Georgian people toward the Jews' (Aaron Krikheli cited in Ben-Oren 1992).

When a new Jerusalem finally came to be designed on Russian soil, it had to outshine all previous attempts in the Christian Orthodox world. Thus, in 1658, the Moscow patriarch Nikon (1605–81) started building a full-scale copy of the Jerusalem *Anastasis* (Price 2000; Kain 2017). He placed his 'New-Resurrection' monastery near the river Istra, renamed 'Jordan'. The places around also acquired Biblical names: Tabor, Hermon, Sinai, Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane, etc. The complex was created with almost scientific accuracy following the plans of Jerusalem buildings, which became available in Moscow thanks to detailed descriptions, three-dimensional models and printed architectural drawings. It mirrored the famous Western 'Holy Sepulchre' at S. Stefano in Bologna.

The fascination with the Holy Land was not a new phenomenon in Russia. The first account of a Russian pilgrim to (Old) Jerusalem is that of the abbot Daniel who travelled between 1104 and 1107 in the aftermath of the capture of Jerusalem by the First Crusade (Price 2000: 251–52). His descriptions are valuable both for the information they give of the places he visits but also because of the religious and cultural sensitivities associated with what he sees or, indeed, does not see. Thus, the Holy Places are in the care of Christians. Greek monks reside in the major monasteries but some of the sites are in the hands of Latin clergy. The crusader massacres have ensured that the Holy Land is free from Jews and Muslims which do not appear in his account; the only 'Saracens' he mentions are robbers who threaten pilgrims on their way. Most revealing is his account of the Holy Saturday celebration at the *Anastasis* with the coming of the 'Easter fire'. A great multitude of people from all tongues and nations fills the church. The service is conducted by the Greek monks but Latin clergy sing on the side in their own tongue. Daniel did not know Greek or Latin but he was clearly able to recognize the members of the different churches. He then describes how the miraculous fire distributed to the faithful, including, firstly, to Baldwin I, the Crusader King of Jerusalem. Daniel had asked for permission to place—on behalf of all Russian people—his own candle

inside the Tomb of Christ. His request was granted: the candle had to be on the floor and he was only allowed to enter the sacred space barefoot after having to take his sandals off. At the end of the service, he was ecstatic to see his candle ablaze with the miraculous fire but also took care to note that the lamps the Latins had hung above the Tomb had remained unlit.

The popularity of Daniel's descriptions in Russia reveals a perception of Jerusalem in which the unique sanctity of the place is clearly acknowledged: signalled by the ritual removing of shoes at the Tomb of Christ. The religious demarcation of the sacred was also made clear: the Holy Places belong to Christians, and among them the Orthodox are the ones favoured by divine grace. The Latin clergy were singled out not just because of their language but also because they had placed their lamps high up but still failed to obtain grace—the miraculous fire had passed them by. Humility, symbolized by Daniel's entering the sacred space barefoot and the placing of the Russian candle on the floor, was ultimately more successful in attracting grace. The sacred is in this instance shared only by Christians and clear lines are set which define the degrees of access to it.

At the end of the seventeenth century, we find these features reappear in patriarch Nikon's new Jerusalem at Moscow with its full-size copy of the *Anastasis* church and the surroundings of his *Voskresensky* monastery landscaped as a new Palestine. The project was a success but Nikon ended up condemned and deposed at the Moscow council of 1666, at which the patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch were also present. Nikon's work had been so meticulous that he was charged with arrogance for pretending to have set up not just a 'model' (*obrazetz*) of Jerusalem but for seeking to supplant the original Jerusalem (tr. Price 2000: 260–61). His chief transgression, however, was that in doing so he had also claimed for himself the title 'Patriarch of New Jerusalem' thus appearing to challenge the seniority of the Eastern patriarchs (Kain 2017: 392). Simple believers were said to have been 'scandalized' by the degree of presumed similarity between the 'new' holy places at Moscow and those in Palestine. Many were even prepared to believe that the Romanov Tsar and Tsarina were now their new Constantine and Helena (Ibid.: 375–6). As for outsiders who were denied access, the council of 1666 condemned the group which had resisted Nikon's liturgical reforms. Excluded from the new-Moscow-Jerusalem, they became known as 'Old Believers'.

III.

In the fourth century, not all Christians agreed that pilgrimage to Jerusalem was essential to their faith. Christ, as Gregory of Nyssa famously wrote, had not required it of those whom he

called ‘blessed’ in his Sermon on the Mount (*Letter* 2, 2–3, Matt. 5; Bitton-Ashkelony 2005: 53). What mattered for being a good disciple of Christ was not the place (*topos*) but the way (*tropos*). Cappadocia, or indeed Constantinople, could offer examples of equal or even greater sanctity. The basic soundness of this theology did not, however, prevent the spectacular growth of pilgrimage in Late Antiquity. This was followed by the emergence of new Jerusalem sites across the Christian world. Concluding our brief review, we note that something always appears to have been lost in the *translations* of Jerusalem which fill the pages of history. Constantinople acquired relics but did not seek to replicate Holy Places; Georgia—one main relic with a major cathedral and a rudimentary complex of sites; and Moscow—no major relic but the most spectacular re-creation of the Holy Places in the Orthodox world. In all cases, the translation of the sacred posed a problem of exclusivity. In the fourth century, the building of the Constantinian church of the *Anastasis* right opposite the ruined Temple was seen as a ‘fresh new’ Jerusalem—marking also the line separating Jews as ‘outsiders’ from the initiated Christians. In Constantinople, the keeping of major relics inside the imperial palace had a similar effect, supported by the legislation excluding Jews from settling in Jerusalem and, later on, non-Nicene Christians from worshipping inside the walls of Constantinople. In Georgia, uniquely, a more inclusive climate seems to have developed around the Holy Places at Mtskheta, especially with regard to Jews, whose ancestors were credited with contributing to the Christianisation of the country. In Russia, striving to consolidate its reputation as ‘Third Rome’, the creation of the most ambitious replica of the Jerusalem Holy Places coincided with one of the most violent episodes in Orthodox Christian history. In the long history of realizing new Jerusalem(s), the Jews and Muslims missing from abbot Daniel’s account of his twelfth-century pilgrimage to the Holy Land effectively correspond to the Old Believers excluded from the new Moscow-Jerusalem at the end of the seventeenth century. The horrors accompanying the arrival of the crusaders in the Holy Land presage the apocalyptic persecution unleashed against the Old Believers. As background to both, we find the exclusive sacredness of Jerusalem’s Holy Places, old and new. Can there be a different *tropos*? As at the dawn of Christian history, the Jerusalem church is offering, not triumphantly but in humility and through its crucified members, its apostolic voice: ‘come and see’ (*Kairos Palestine Document,* §6, 2. WCC 2021).

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