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In the first place people gather in cities to communicate and exchange [Berque A.]
? Exchanges can be of all kinds including immaterial ones, even on a sacred basis. The whole of some cities is sacred : it is the case of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem is a modern town as well and the capital of Israel. Here, the future and the past collapse.

History

Jerusalem is at the center of Jewish life since -1 000 e.v., when king David decided to make the capital of his kingdom of it. His son, Salomon, built the Temple there. Since its destruction in 70 e.v. and until the restoration of Jewish sovereignty with the State of Israel, in 1948, the destiny of the city depended on various States and Nations.

Till the end of the 19-th century, Jerusalem was split into four different districts : Jewish, Moslem, Christian and Armenian. After 1860, the Jewish population, who had been continually present became the majority and began to create new areas outside the surrounding wall. Indeed, the deep aspiration for the return to Israel in the Diaspora — the Alya— took with Theodore Herzl at the very beginning of the 20-th century the form of a political movement : Zionism.

After the Independence War, in 1948, the city is divided into two parts : the East which included the Old town, controlled by Jordan ; and the West, which became part of Israel. In 1967, after the Six Days War, Jerusalem reunified.

Religious and community aspects.

Any city includes sacred places, but what makes a whole city sacred ? Of course, it is not the addition of its sacred spots —even if they are many—. It is the fact that the city acts as a religious magnet on an area wider than its immediate surrounding and hinterland [Peters F. E.] : more than two million people go to Jerusalem every year with religious or cultural reasons.

The holiness of Jerusalem is maintained by the three abrahamic religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam— but they differ in their perception and representation of its holiness.

In the Jewish religion, the city itself is sacred and holy. It represents the heart of the Judaism and embodies the permanence through centuries of spiritual and national Jewish life. Since thousands of years, all the Jews of the world, turn their face towards Jerusalem when they pray.

For the Christians, Jerusalem is worshipped as the city where major episodes of Jesus life and the crucifixion took place. It is associated with the early stages of Christian church, and includes numerous pilgrimage sites.

In the Moslem tradition, the mountain of the Temple is the place from where Mahomet flew during a night towards God's throne.

In fact each one will see the town under a different angle according to his own beliefs :

- from the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre for the Christians ;
- from the mosque El Aksa, recently established third shrine of the Islam after Mecca and Medina ;
- from the Western Wall or Kotel, the last remain of the Second Temple, a place of prayer —the holiest for the Jews of the whole world— which symbolizes the Temple destroyed 2000 years ago.

Sometimes, the same place shows itself under different points of view : such is the case of the Dome of the Rock. It is built on a rock from where Mahomet supposedly took off for heaven but, as well, it conceals the Inner Sanctum of the Jewish Temple, and represents too the place where Abraham placed the altar for his son Isaac. One can find numerous holy places here. As a result of which its cityscape is three times sacred.

A specific configuration

It is not surprising, thus, if Jerusalem concentrates strong community tensions. Since 2 000 years this city embodies the umbilicus of the world. As such, it always remained at the very center of religious conflicts, with controversial scales of holiness

and sententious claims that frequently degenerate into wars (Crusades of the 10th century for example). But Jerusalem is a strong symbol of peace and unity too, as the city of the single God.

Consequently, Jerusalem is a special case with its extreme complexity. In fact, there are three different cities all-in-one. Today, nevertheless radically Jewish, Jerusalem is a multi-ethnic town where Jews and Arabs, religious and secular people, oriental and western communities, live —year in year out— side by side. A very rich and active cultural and artistic life results from this specific configuration.

François Mancebo

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