

HOLY LAND

"Forbidden to talk about Jesus": shock proposal in Israel

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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**Nicola
Scopelliti**



First came the judicial reform to make it dependent on politics, now there's a bill in the pipeline to block religious freedom in Israel. These are the flagships of the government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of a coalition composed of parties from the extreme

nationalist right.

If the first issue, i.e. judicial reform, has prompted numerous demonstrations organised throughout Israel, involving thousands of citizens, roadblocks, clashes with the police, and arrests, the second has created bewilderment and concern among Christians in the Holy Land, the land where Jesus was born and from where the Gospel message spread throughout the world.

On 9 January, without disclosing what they were about to do, two deputies of the United Torah Judaism party, Moshe Gafni and Yaakov Asher, presented a bill called "Prohibition of Proselytism for Religious Conversion", which would expressly prohibit evangelisation, declaring illegal any type of proclamation that refers to the figure of Jesus Christ and his teachings. According to them, some groups, particularly 'Christian missionaries', have intensified their efforts to convert Jews. If the bill is passed, punishments of up to one year in prison are envisaged for offenders, a punishment that would increase to two years "if the recipient of the message is a minor". The bill would prevent the possibility of "speaking to persuade or convert a person of a different faith, through personal interviews, but also through the use of mail or videos". This is a one-way law that the two Knesset members want. After the break-up of the USSR, many citizens of the former Soviet empire chose to move to Israel and became Jews out of conviction or for convenience, but no one has thought of proposing legislation to prevent this. This is what the leaders of the Christian Churches say.

But what is happening now in Israel is a bolt from the blue. The news was spread by a Messianic Jew, of the *Trinity Broadcasting Network*. Reactions from Christians were immediate. The harshest rejection came from American evangelicals, who are an important support to Israeli policy in the United States and who are present and very active in Israel. The bishops of the Holy Land are not hiding their concern either. The Foreign Ministry has been inundated with phone calls from ambassadors, consuls, Christian leaders, and Jews from all over the world urging the Foreign Minister, Eli Cohen, to prevent the draft law from becoming enforceable. Prime Minister Netanyahu hastened to publish a statement on Twitter in Hebrew and English: "No law against the Christian community will pass".

The climate of tension in Israel increases day by day. Since the beginning of the year, 14 Israelis and 85 Palestinians have died. Churches and other places where Christians gather are being raided by extremists of the Israeli ultra-right. Only a few days ago two terrorist attacks were carried out by Jewish extremists: the first in Nazareth, where shots were fired at a school and a convent of Franciscan nuns, and the

other, in Jerusalem, at the Church of the Tomb of Mary, located at the foot of the Mount of Olives and owned jointly by the Greek Orthodox and the Armenians, according to the *status quo* regulations. A harsh condemnation came from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and Patriarch Theophilos III, who highlighted the "ferocious terrorist attack" that saw the perpetrators, two Jewish extremists - according to witnesses, one was wearing a "yarmulke" (the traditional Jewish headdress) and the other a "tzitzit" (shawl) - enter the holy place with an iron bar, trying to hit the celebrant. The police, through a spokesman, said that a man had been arrested, but gave no further information.

In this climate of anti-Christian tension, protests against justice reform

continue to mount. On Thursday a 'Day of Paralysis' was declared in Israel. Numerous protesters were arrested, while police used water cannons and mounted officers to disperse the demonstrators. The motorway was also cut off and cleared by the police after three hours. During the night, the helicopter landing area near Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Caesarea residence was occupied and protestors displayed posters outside the homes of senior members of his party, the Likud, for the role played by this political formation in the attempted legislative change that could seriously endanger Israeli democracy itself.