



THE TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE

A Dry Winter Precedes Lent

Dan Koski, Tantur Staff



Winter is a comparatively short affair in the Holy Land, although sitting in our stone building on our breezy hilltop, it always seems to come a little earlier and leave later than in the rest of the country. Since our early winter storm that seemed to herald the start of a wet winter, we've had the cold, but almost no precipitation to speak of. Should it not rain in these final weeks of late winter and early spring, we are fortunate enough at Tantur to have our own cisterns, meaning that water

will be less of an issue for us than in other parts of the region, but we live in the hope that some much-needed moisture will still come from the heavens. This early March, all of the Christian churches began preparations for Easter on the same date (April 20th). It is an occurrence that comes once every three years, one that, like the rain, is always looked for and sorely missed in its absence. May both rain and Easter find us here at Tantur in due time, in due course.

Tantur at a Glance: An Early Start to a Busy Year



It's no exaggeration to state that this year has been one of the busiest first quarters on record for Tantur. Following a brief lull between the end of our 2013 Three-Month Sabbatical and Western Christmas, we've had no less than five study programs and our Six-Week Program join us in what is normally a quiet period of pilgrimage in the Holy Land.



This past January, we were also pleased to host a French-language ecumenical prayer service for the Week of Prayer for Unity in the Holy Land, officiated by Tantur resident scholar, Pastor David Bouillon. Thanks to all who attended this special event!

Reflection on Tantur

Rev. Jeffrey Laible

The landscape, the heat, the sights, sounds and smells of the desert climate: I had seen and experienced similar surroundings when I was deployed to the Middle East in 2004. And while this was my first trip to Israel, my initial reaction to the land, as I made my way from the airport to Tantur, was not one of complete surprise. I had only forgotten how hot and intense the sun was (in the Middle East), especially during the summer months.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to make the long journey to Jerusalem. Previous attempts to work in a time to visit this diverse cultural, historical and spiritual land had failed. Six overseas deployments from 2004 to 2011 required significant time away from my civilian parishes, and therefore left no time for an extended period to explore Israel. Finally, after 25 years of active ministry, the opportunity presented itself, and I gladly accepted the chance to see the land of Jesus.

We came to Tantur from around the world, all shaped by different cultures, religious backgrounds, and ways of understanding life. We came to a very complicated and assorted land. The July 2013 group brought 16 individuals together, all with seemingly the same quest: to explore the varied land of Israel, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. In doing just this, we encountered the prophets of the Old Testament, the place where Jesus and his disciples lived and walked, a land that has been ruled by



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Tantur July 2013 CEP participants with parish priest Fr. Emmanuel in Aboud, Palestine.

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Tantur Almond Trees in Blossom



Tantur almond tree, February 2014.

When our past program participants and residents are asked, “What was it like to live at Tantur?” their responses most often include a vivid description of our gardens, olive trees and flower beds. Yet you can often tell who is an alumni of our Six-Week program, as they very often will include one special addition into their narrative: “The Almond trees were all in bloom!”

The almond tree (*Loz* in Arabic, *sha-ked* in Hebrew) is a very special part of the horticultural life of the Holy Land. The local species blooms early in the year; starting in early February and lasting until March. The almond tree is mentioned 10 times in the Bible, and plays an important part in both Jewish and Christian symbolism. The almond blossom is also closely associated with the arrival of spring, and consequently, the coming of Passover and Easter.



A Month at Tantur

Signe Aarvik

In the late summer of 2013, Signe Aarvik, a student of the Norwegian School of Theology, joined us at Tantur. As part of the Tantur Fellowship Program, she worked as a volunteer librarian's assistant while completing her thesis on young Norwegians of Somali origin and their relation to the Muslim faith.

Spending one month at Tantur in September 2013 was a great gift and wonderful experience to me. I was fortunate to be accepted to the work-to-write-program, which enabled me to go because I could pay for my stay by working in the library. I was at the time a master student at The Norwegian school of Theology, studying sociology of religion with focus on Islam in the West. I was at the last semester of writing my thesis, and so my purpose for coming to Tantur was first of all to concentrate on my writing, and hopefully at the same time experience a little bit of the Holy Land.

Staying in Israel had nothing to do with the topic of my thesis, which was *Faith and practice among young women of Somali origin in Norway*. This project came about as a part of my wish to acquire more knowledge about Islam, and more specifically about the experience of growing up as a young muslim in Norway. Among several questions I was interested in what impact growing up in a modern western context - characterized by secularism and individualism - might have on their Islamic faith and practice. I had already finished my fieldwork and interviews in Oslo, and my desire to go to Israel was first of all motivated by a wish to travel abroad and stay at a somehow exotic place for a month while working on the analysis of my material. And also Tantur was a place I had long wanted to visit because of my interest in ecumenism and interreligious relations.

I could not have imagined a more perfect place for writing. So peaceful, and at the same time I never felt lonely for a second. The beautiful surroundings, the library, the people and the food were much more that I could hope for. Most of my days consisted of first taking my breakfast out in the lovely garden, then writing in the library, lunch, conversations, writing again, dinner and a walk in the sunset accompanied by the sound of *maghrib* (Muslim sunset prayer). At the end of the day I spent three hours working in the library, categorizing books and documents about the Israel-Palestinian conflict which belonged to the earlier IPCRI-library. And before going to bed I had a cup of tea with one of my new friends from the staff. These were perfect days for a period of reflection and writing, and were made even more complete by the chance of getting to know great people and having new experiences.

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A Month at Tantur

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I had spent two weeks travelling all over Israel and the West Bank the summer before, so I didn't feel the need to go everywhere – and as far as I am concerned, Jerusalem and Bethlehem have more than enough to offer. Among many things to mention, I appreciated spending a couple of days writing in the library of Bethlehem University, trying to “blend in” and experience the local student life.

I accomplished almost all the work I had planned to, and went home more than satisfied (and a little heartbroken over having to leave so soon). I have fallen in love with the land, in which I now also have friends to visit. I have a feeling it has a lot more for me to learn and experience, and that it won't be long before I return. Many thanks again to those who made my stay possible, and to all of you who welcomed me and made my days so wonderful.

Reflection on Tantur

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countless nations, a strategically important economic and cultural place for thousands of years, and so much more.

I came to the land of Israel with my own set of lenses – my vision of the world that had been shaped by both my civilian parish ministry and military chaplaincy. I entered into an area of the world that had garnered much of my attention in previous years, both through theological studies, and more recently, through my ministry as a chaplain in the Armed Forces of the United States. The Middle East had an imprint on my mind and pastoral experience.

And what did I find? Conflict and peace. Checkpoints, security walls, Israeli Defense Forces, the sights and sounds of unrest, the remnants of war and ongoing conflict. I also experienced tremendous peace and hope as I listened to clergy, laity and scholars in various locations speak from their heart about how they have worked tirelessly to bring Jesus' message of love and forgiveness to their congregations, communities and the surrounding region.

Perhaps most importantly, as the month at Tantur concluded, I left Israel with a strong sense that amidst the ongoing struggles and conflict, many people, from a wide variety of religious perspectives are yearning, working and praying for a lasting peace.

The mission of Tantur serves as a beacon of peace, hope and reconciliation, not just to the sabbatical student, but most importantly, to Jerusalem and beyond.

Rev. Jeffrey G. Laible serves as a Pastor of four Roman Catholic Parishes in Central Illinois, USA. He is also a Chaplain in the Illinois Air National Guard/Armed Forces of the United States. He participated in the July 2013 Continuing Education Program.

Staff Shot

Tantur Chef Issa Babish



For 25 years, Issa “Abu George” Babish has been honing his culinary skills in and around the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Having earned the designation of Chef since the last 15 of those years, Issa has worked hard to perfect his craft working in kitchens of innumerable institutions, restaurants and hotels. The result in the Tantur Cafeteria has been fantastic, with high marks from our program participants across the board. So what is Chef Issa's secret? In his own words:

“What makes Tantur special is two things: the freedom I am given to work with my excellent staff, and the generosity of the quantity and quality of food that we are asked to provide to those that eat here. We work together as a team to make something special, and I look forward to being able to share what I make, perhaps with a Tantur Cookbook one day.”

While scaling back his commitments to other kitchens since joining our staff, Issa still finds time for his wife and four children, as well as to prepare the annual Christmas banquet at the Church of the Nativity, officiated by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch and President of Palestine. We're in good hands (and with full stomachs) at Tantur!

Steps Towards Unification of Easter Celebrations in the Holy Land

Divisions between Christian communities in the Holy Land are most noticeable (some might argue shameful) during Christmas and Easter, due to chronological discrepancies between the Gregorian, Julian and (in the case of Christmas) Armenian calendars. For the local Christian communities residing in Israel and Palestine, these divisions further complicate an already difficult situation of celebrating the two most important religious periods in an overwhelmingly Muslim and/or Jewish society, as most Christian families have members who celebrate these feasts on at least two calendars.

In an important step towards practical ecumenical cooperation, the Latin Patriarchate has decreed that its parishes outside of Jerusalem and

Bethlehem district will now celebrate Easter on the Julian Calendar, meaning that Holy Week will coincide with the Greek Orthodox dates to allow for Christian families in the smaller, mostly Greek Orthodox Christian villages to coincide to allow for maximum participation in the life of the church. The dates for Easter coincide every three years, including in 2014, 2015 will mark the first year in which this unification will take noticeable effect. While this decision only impacts Latin Patriarchal parishes in the smaller communities of the Palestinian Territories and parts of Israel, it is a hopeful step forward towards greater cooperation on other important Christian concerns. For more information, visit: [Catholic News Service](#).



The Greek Orthodox Catholicicon of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Denominational discord continues to hamper celebrations during Holy Week in Jerusalem and elsewhere.

Tantur is an institute for ecumenical and theological studies, situated on a beautiful hill in Jerusalem near Bethlehem. It serves as a welcoming place in The Holy Land for visitors who come from all over the world seeking an oasis of learning, community, and hospitality.

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A blessed Lenten season to all!



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