

Christian-Muslim relations in a future Iraq: Recent media comment

This is the first of a monthly series on an aspect of Christian-Muslim relationships. Reports in this series will firstly seek to provide a factual digest of news reports or other published information on the subject under discussion. They will also include a brief conclusion – which will contain the element of evaluation.

Structure of following information.

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Precis of major article in The Tablet March 15 2003
Information from Iraqi diaspora sources
Information based on comment/direct news etc of Christians in Iraq/Middle East
Possible difficulties relating to Western Christian
Conclusions

There is both a substantial – and also historic – Christian community in Iraq. A reasonable estimate seems to be perhaps 750,000 out of a total population of approximately 24 million. There are also considerable numbers of Christians of Iraqi origin living outside the country (in some cases for generations). Detroit, in the US, is a particular base. What is the attitude of the Iraqi Christian community to the war and what does the future hold for them? They have received a reasonable amount of attention in the news media in recent weeks – and the following comments are based on that as well as an extended conversation with a senior Christian Iraqi currently resident in the United Kingdom.

Basic information regarding the situation of Christians in Iraq

(drawn from published information, and conversations)

The ‘core community’ of Iraqi Christians are the Chaldean Catholics. (? 500,000). The spiritual ancestors of this community were members of the ancient Church of the East (who did not accept the Council of Ephesus and were then designated as ‘Nestorians’). As the result of Catholic missions in the 16th and 17th centuries the majority of Christians acknowledged the supremacy of Rome and thus became a Uniate Church. Their Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid resides in Baghdad.

Elements of the ‘Church of the East’ who did not accept the authority of Rome continued as a separate church. Today there are commonly known as the ‘Assyrian Church’ – although this Church fractured in the 20th century over issues such as the question of the calendar – and there are two separate branches.

There are also Syrian Orthodox (one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches) and Syrian Catholic (their ‘Uniate’ branch) Christians – whose heartlands are in the north – around Mosul, though many now live in Baghdad.

Small groups of Armenians, Armenian Catholics and Latin Catholics exist. The Protestant community is represented by a group – perhaps 5000 strong – who are the spiritual descendants of those (largely members of the ‘Church of the East’) who converted as a result of American Presbyterian missions in the 19th century. They are normally called by the generic term Evangelicals. There is no indigenous Anglican community – although there is a Church building in Baghdad, St George’s, (not in use for a number of years), which has been in the past a base for an expatriate congregation – drawn from eg diplomats.

One of the key issues for Iraqi Christians is how far they are prepared to define themselves as Arabs. Certainly some are not – and are proud of an alternative ‘Assyrian’ heritage. (British and American

missionaries in the 19th century seem to have been originally largely responsible for this self-understanding as 'Assyrian'.) How helpful or desirable the encouragement of this 'Assyrian' self-identity is is perhaps questionable.

What are the attitudes of the Iraqi Christian community – towards Saddam, the downfall of his regime, and their longer-term relations with the majority Muslim community in Iraq? As might be expected it is very varied. It is worth noting that the fate of this Christian community seems to be a particular concern of Pope John II. (Partly due to the substantial Uniate elements in the community – though it is worth noting that in 1994 a joint declaration and agreement on the doctrine of Christ between the Pope and the Church of the East was published.)

The Tablet of 15 March 2003 ...

Carried a lengthy and foundational article on the current and prospective situation of Iraq's Christians by the British Catholic specialist in Oriental Christianity, Anthony O'Mahony (who teaches at Heythrop College London). It refers to the anxiety felt by the Pope for the community, and analyses their characteristics. They are 'a dynamic and entrepreneurial community. Backed by the Churches' commitment to education, they are strongly represented in the urban middle classes.' Before the economic difficulties which began as a result of the events in 1990, the community was 'generally prosperous. Favoured by their knowledge of the West, they were the natural intermediaries for a number of foreign companies established in Iraq'. The different socio-economic position of the various elements of the Christian community was however noticed. 'The Assyrians were generally poor'. The fact that (as long as they were cooperative) the Christians had generally benefited from the regime was noted. The 1970 constitution of Iraq (pre-dates Saddam, but in the Baath era) recognises 'the legitimate rights of all minorities in the frame of Iraqi unity' – and acknowledges the legal rights and existence of the main Christian communities, with benefits supplied to Christians – eg churches get free electricity and water (as do mosques) and there are various other state subsidies. However in 1974 all schools (including Church schools) were nationalised. The Chaldean Church in Iraq sponsors Babel College – a college under the auspices of the Chaldean Patriarchate (but with an ecumenical student/staff body). It offers courses in theology/philosophy – mainly directed towards lay people – but it is also involved in clergy formation. There is also an important charity arm of the Chaldean Church founded after the 1991 Gulf War, which has helped about 400,000 people.

The limited participation of Christians in political life was also noted. – the Iraqi Baath party, in spite of its secular ideology, regards Islam as an important component of Arab culture (unlike Christianity.). The founder of the Baath party Michael Afleq eventually converted to Islam for this reason. (My conversation partner in London commented that the Islamic emphasis in Baathism was accentuated after the Iranian revolution of 1979 – because of Saddam's fears of the spread of a militant Islam from Iran, destabilising his regime, particularly because of the large Shia community in Iraq.) Christians are not able to utilise the traditional family/tribal ties that have largely defined power relationships up till now. Tariq Aziz – is the exception that proves the rule – though he has been so influential precisely because as a Christian he does not 'threaten' Saddam in the way that influential Muslims would. The article noted that Christians tended to be confined to 'assistant' rather than 'most senior' positions in ministries, the army etc. It was also noted that in the Iraq-Iran war Christians suffered a disproportionate number of casualties. (My conversation partner confirmed this – this was due to the fact that Christians did not have the power and connections to secure comparatively safer roles for their young men in the war.) There is therefore a male/female imbalance in the Christian community.

The articles commented on the pressure on and difficulties of Christians eg Islam is recognised as the religion of the State in the Iraqi constitution; though a Christian woman can marry a Muslim man – their children will be Muslims (and the corresponding situation of a Muslim woman marrying a Christian is not accepted under Muslim law). Christians have also suffered under the repressive policies of the Saddam Hussein regime eg censorship, needing approval of authorities for religious leaders etc. Specific examples of direct persecution were mentioned eg the murder of an elderly nun in August 2002, attacks on Christians leaving worship, and on the family of a Christian church worker.

The question of the future was raised. It noted that some Christians at least felt that the regime of Saddam Hussein was the lesser of two evils. Quote from an Iraqi Christian leader, 'Up to the Gulf Wars Saddam Hussein was good to the Christians, now he is not bad.....Absurd as it may sound, for

Christians in Iraq a continuation of the present regime is still the lesser evil. Christians would have nothing good to expect from either the collapse of the country or from an Islamic revolution.'

The situation of Christians in the Kurdish Autonomous region was noted. (approx 70,000 there). They have been reasonably well treated – with political representation in the local parliament – and allowed to teach in their schools in the Syriac language. However here too Christians feel unsure re the future.

Iraqi Christians in the Diaspora – and their views

Inevitably for practical reasons some recent media comment has focused on the situation and viewpoint of Iraqi Christians who live in the diaspora. The following are examples (with extracts from the original articles quoted to a greater or lesser degree depending on copyright issues.)

In the United Kingdom

The Times of 5 April 2003 carried a report of a discussion with Iraqi Christians based in London. The figures given in the article for the number of Christians in Iraq are larger than in The Tablet article (they may be an overestimation). A conversation with Rt Rev Andreas Abouna, chaplain for the last 12 years to the Chaldean Catholic community (and shortly to become Assistant Chaldean Bishop of Baghdad) commented on the fact that churches in Baghdad had been open for prayer – and possible refuge. Babel College was however closed. Bishop Abouna was opposed to the invasion – not least because he felt that bombing could not be as accurate as maintained. Apparently Bartella, a Christian village near Mosul was bombed. Father Yonan Yonan, of the Assyrian Church of the East, maintained that hitherto relations between Christians and Muslims had been very good. There was feeling against the war also expressed by Father Safaa Habash (Syrian Catholic Chaplain in London) – and reference to the close links between Christians and Muslims. Similarly Christian layperson, Dr Suha Rassam commented on the archeological and early Christian remains in the area of Mosul – and their importance.

The article concludes by commenting:

It is 'unclear what will be the place of Christians in any new regime. There are fears that they could find themselves under a hard-line Islamic government or that they might be the target of American evangelicals keen to spread the kind of Christianity in the Arab world, as they have done in Latin America. For Iraq's ancient Christian culture, both possibilities would surely prove disastrous.'

The Tablet of 12 April 2003 contained a brief report from a correspondent who had attended Mass at the Chaldean Catholic Church in London, noting that approximately 500 Iraqi Chaldean families live in and close to London. It commented that Iraqi Catholics living in Britain have expressed fears that their families will be targeted by extremists because of the war against Iraq.' Bishop Abouna (see report above) and members of the congregation were quoted as saying that there was 'no justification for war' and that there would be great anger in Iraq when the war was over. Particular concern was expressed at how Muslim-Christian relations would be affected. 'Even now, for the Christians it is beginning to get dangerous...People are already beginning to say to them, "you're with the others, Christians from Western countries".the Muslims and Christians in Iraq have always been very friendly, but the war will change everything. We are afraid the fundamentalists will rise up.' (Bishop Abouna)

In France

(note particularly significant comments below re the process of defining future political structures)

An article produced by the American linked Radio station , Radio Free Europe and dated 2 April 2003 contains the following comment by Naman Adlun - a leading member of the Association of France's Assyro-Chaldeans (AACF), which has its headquarters near Paris. He told RFE/RL the U.S.-led war on Iraq, which he describes as "illegal" and "illegitimate," has triggered mixed reactions among France's exiled Christian Iraqis. "We're having mixed feelings. We generally oppose this war and want it to end as quickly as possible. But, at the same time, we want to get rid of Saddam. It is a little bit difficult [for us]. Our community is split into two groups. There are those who support military strikes on Iraq in the belief that they are the price of freedom. But do we really have to pay such a high price to obtain our

freedom? Others oppose those strikes which the U.S. has preferred to a diplomatic and peaceful solution [to the standoff with Saddam]."

Other comment in the same article was by Joseph Yacoub who teaches political science at the French-based Lyon Catholic University. This expert on ethnic and religious minorities said 250 Assyro-Chaldean families have fled Baghdad and headed for Zakhu and Dohuk in Kurdistan since coalition forces started bombing Baghdad two weeks ago. The headquarters of the Chaldean Church in Baghdad recently suffered damage during a U.S. air raid and had to be relocated. But Yacoub believes the worst is yet to come for Iraq's Christian community. "Especially for Iraq's Christian community, this war is a looming threat because of the confusion that might arise and lead to the perception that a Christian West is fighting a Muslim East. Consequently, there is a risk that Iraq's Christian community might become a scapegoat," he said. Yacoub fears that -- despite antiwar sentiments expressed by Christian churches, including Bush's own denomination, the United Methodist Church -- the [US Congress] resolution might backfire against Iraqi Christians. "[This resolution] is an extremely aggravating factor. Initially, the U.S. administration spoke about a 'crusade,' and we all know what negative impact the Crusades have left on the Arab Muslim collective imagination. Then there came the Manichaean opposition between 'good' and 'evil.' And now we have the U.S. Congress decision, which threatens to spread even more confusion," Yacoub said.

Comment was also made re the planning process for the post-Saddam government. The article pointed out how in the lead-up to the war, meetings have taken place in London between officials of the Bush administration and the Iraqi National Congress (INC), a U.S.-sponsored umbrella organization of groups in opposition to the Baghdad regime.

These meetings notably examined several draft constitutions for a post-Saddam Iraq, which Assyro-Chaldeans -- represented at the talks by the Kurdish-based Assyrian Democratic Movement -- say are detrimental to their community.

The French Assyro-Chaldean leader Naman Adlun said the outcome of a 13-16 December INC conference in London raised serious concerns among Assyro-Chaldeans. "Several draft constitutions were presented [at this meeting], some of them emphasizing Iraq's Arabic and Muslim character. We, of course, disagree with such a wording. What we want is a democratic and secular country. These draft constitutions remain on the table today, and nothing has been decided," Adlun said. In a letter sent to Bush on 13 January, nine Western European-based Assyro-Chaldean associations expressed their concern at the possibility of post-Saddam Iraq being governed by Shariah, or Islamic law.

"In the draft constitution that was presented at the London conference, the reference to Islam is much stronger than in today's Iraqi Constitution. This was done under the influence of some Shia and Kurdish opposition groups. The current Iraqi Constitution says Islam is the religion of the state but nothing more. There is nothing in there that says Shariah is the root of the existing legislation, while the text that was presented [in London] is clearly Islamic. It describes Shariah as the source of tomorrow's legal norms, and the least we can say is that it raises concerns," Religious minorities expert Yacoub said.

Assyro-Chaldeans argue that they are underrepresented in opposition meetings and fear they might be equally underrepresented in Iraq's future parliament. Some exiled Assyro-Chaldean groups have also leveled criticism at the Assyrian Democratic Movement (another Christian political group). They accuse this group of lobbying the interests of Barzani's KDP, which controls those areas where most of Iraqi Kurdistan's Christians live. In addition, as AACF leader Adlun pointed out, recent U.S.-sponsored opposition talks in London and Ankara have so far failed to take the large Christian communities of Baghdad and Basra into account -- a circumstance that, he implied, could lead to tensions within Iraq's Assyro-Chaldean community. "More than 500,000 Assyro-Chaldeans live in and around Baghdad, in a part of Iraq that is not autonomous and remains under the control of Saddam's regime. They have to be taken into consideration. If we want to avoid a vision of post-Saddam Iraq centered on the north, on Kurdistan, we have to consult with them. There should be no divisions, no tensions among the Assyro-Chaldean community," Adlun said. Yacoub said Assyro-Chaldeans insist that the territorial integrity of Iraq be preserved. "We want a democratic and secular Iraq, and we do not want Iraq to be partitioned," Adlun confirmed. "But as far as we are concerned, the post-Saddam era is clouded with uncertainty."

In the United States

There are a considerable number of reports coming out of the US – particularly from the Detroit area – where the largest Assyrian/Chaldean community exists. In the early days of the war there was particular concern being expressed as to whether Iraqi Christians might suffer in a backlash from the general anti-Iraqi feeling in the States – and possible FBI interviews with Christian Iraqi immigrants. The Iraqi Christian community was anxious to affirm its loyalty to the US. See eg http://www.bayarea.com/mld/mercurynews/news/special_packages/iraq/5473122.htm (an Associated press report picked up by a number of local USP papers)

The fact that Saddam Hussein donated a million pounds to build the Chaldean Church in Detroit is noted in an article in the Daily Telegraph on 7 April 2003. The leadership of the community there was criticised for being too close to Saddam.

Another AP Report of 11 April spoke of the jubilation that Chaldean Christians based in the US were feeling re the regime change – and that equality is now the main concern for Chaldean and other minorities. Promises of financial etc support to Iraq were being offered and encouraged. Nabil Youkhana of Shelby Township said the number one responsibility of Iraqi Americans is to aid those who stayed home, allowing them to rebuild and reclaim their country. "(Chaldeans) want to see all the Christians in Iraq and all the Kurds and all the Muslims and Arabs become one united state," Youkhana said. "Use the United States as a role model." For the full report see eg

<http://www.detnews.com/2003/metro/0304/12/metro-134682.htm>

In Canada

The Ottawa Citizen of 14 April drew on the comment of an Iraqi exile, Said Bello, soon to be ordained a Chaldean priest that Christians in Iraq 'live like slaves'. He spoke of the miserable economic situation of many Christians in Iraq. "The Christians have no work, and no revenue. The powerful are taking advantage of the weak. In some cases, young mothers whose husbands were killed in war have been obliged to become Muslims to feed their children." Christian families are able to continue their lives in Iraq only because relatives in the West are sending them money. Christians in Iraq fear their status will suffer even more once the current war is over. Until recent years, Iraq has been one of Islam's most religiously tolerant countries. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches had the freedom to worship and received free water and electricity as long as they did not try to convert others. But some of the draft constitutions being discussed by U.S. officials and the Iraqi National Congress, a group of organizations that oppose Saddam Hussein's regime, would make Islam's position stronger in any new government. Islam's shariah law has been proposed as the source of Iraq's future legal code. Iraqi Christians fear that could lead to a ban on all forms of non-Islamic worship.

The Vatican

Catholic News Service of April 4 2003 in a report by John Thavis comments on the special attachment of Christians to Iraq – as a land where salvation began, also the apocalyptic overtones to the war in the minds of some fundamentalist Christians. Also speaks of the Vatican's hope for a quick end to the war – and the worry that the ancient Christian community of Iraq could decline still further and become an effective casualty of it. The complete report is found on <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/20030404.htm>

A further report by CNS on April 11 had Father Philip Najim, the Rome representative of the Chaldean Patriarchate commenting on the failure of coalition forces to stop widespread looting – including of archeological sites and expressing the hope that the country's future leaders would be chosen by merit rather than closeness to Anglo-American interests.

<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/briefs/cns/20030411.htm>

The Vatican's top foreign affairs specialist, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, said it was already clear that the Iraqi war would generate terrorism and seriously damage Christian-Muslim dialogue. In an interview with an Italian magazine, Archbishop Tauran said the outbreak of hostilities had saddened him above all because of the "contempt (shown) for international law." "This war will generate all the

extremisms possible, including the Islamic one. We must be aware of this. It will provoke terrorism," he said.

In the Middle East and Iraq

In the early days of the war among the many statements made by groups of religious leaders was this produced by the Middle East Council of Churches on 21 March 2003 which inter alia stated:

‘Churches around the world condemned this war as immoral. They have said this firmly and with conviction ever since this crisis began. More specifically, they have condemned this war for its disregard of principles of international law, its ambivalence to the most basic human values and rights, its potential for tragic human repercussions in Iraq and the Middle East region, as well as its threat of aggravating tensions between religions, giving substance to the false thesis that there is an inevitable clash of civilizations, cultures and religions.’

Also apparently in the early days the following comment was made by Bishop Shlemon Warduni of the Chaldean Church, ‘You have some mullahs denouncing the Crusaders and the infidels from the minaret, meaning us Christians here... The fanatics in Iraq are using it as an excuse to act against the Christians.’ (no exact date available for the quote)

On 26 March Baghdad's Catholic and Christian bishops called for a cease fire. Chaldean Catholic Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni told Vatican Radio that the bishops released their appeal after meeting together March 26th in Baghdad. Bishop Warduni said, "United to our Muslim brothers, we ask everyone to issue an urgent appeal for a cease fore." The bishops cited the terror and casualties associated with the relentless bombing of Baghdad by U.S.-led forces.

Specific damage to Christian premises in Iraq was noted as follows: The Chaldean Catholic Church was forced to close its headquarters in the capital, Baghdad, and transfer its personnel elsewhere after a bomb or missile blew the building's windows out. A Carmelite church in the capital also was damaged.

In Basra, the southern Iraqi city where some of the heaviest fighting occurred, Archbishop Djibrail Kassab appealed for emergency medicine and water-treatment equipment because people risked contracting diseases from drinking contaminated river water. (These items drawn from a Catholic News Service report of 4 April)

As the war began to conclude reports began to appear regarding the future fears of the internal Iraqi Christian community. A Reuters report of April 13 2003 referred to the situation in Kirkuk. Bishop Andraus Sanna (Chaldean Catholic) said that the community had much to be grateful for – but that the situation was not stable, and having enjoyed relative religious freedom under Saddam the Christian community has now got something to lose from those who considered them former allies of Saddam. See eg

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L13601581.htm>

The Times of 21 April 2003 reported on the Easter celebrations in Baghdad in the immediate post-war days, with an article entitled ‘Christians fear future more than Saddam’ suggesting that it was a sombre and fearful time for most of Iraq’s Christian community.’ Unlike other religious groups in Iraq, with more to fear from the future than the past. Christian girls wearing bright lipstick and no headscarves voiced fears that such freedoms would come to a rapid end if hardline clerics among Iraq’s Shia majority impose Sharia, Islamic law, and turn the once-secular state into an Islamic republic. "It is Easter only in name, because all of us are suffering and we are worried. There is no peace, no security and we are not happy".’ There were comments from the Pastor and congregation of the National evangelical Protestant Church in Baghdad. ‘The fault of the (Baathist) regime was not to give the Shias their freedom of worship. That was a mistake and now it could make things worse.’ It was also mentioned that Mohammed Mohsen al’Zubaidi, the self-proclaimed mayor of Baghdad and a recently returned exile, has said that the country’s new constitution would be derived from Islamic Law.

Western Christians – mission, aid etc

A key issue is the role that Western Christians might or might not play in the future Iraq.

There has been a steady flow of reports (which is likely to increase still further) about the desire of Christian American religious groups to play a significant part of the future of Iraq. Although this would include the offering of practical aid – the reports concerned suggest that these groups will want also to engage in evangelism.

Beliefnet 26 March 2003 , a web based wideranging religion resource located in the US has a significant article Poised and ready commenting on the preparations being made by groups such as Samaritan's Purse (associated with Franklin Graham) and the Southern Baptist Convention to develop programs in Iraq. It also commented that Church World Service, a mainline Protestant and Eastern Orthodox aid group found this activity 'worrisome' - in that it might disturb the tenuous balance in Iraq that has been built up between Christians and Muslims over the last decade.

http://www.beliefnet.com/frameset.asp?pageLoc=/story/123/story_12365_1.html&boardI

The Times 19 April 2003 The report from Beliefnet seems to lie behind this article.

The Salt Lake Tribune of 8 April 2003 (based on a Washington Post report) commented on concern re the probably influx of Western Christian agencies into Iraq who would be prepared to work without consultation with local Christian leadership. It pointed out that Jim Jennings, founder of Conscience International, an independent humanitarian group specializing in medical care that has worked in Iraq for more than a decade said that such organisations will descend like a flock of vultures" in an effort to convert Muslims to Christianity. If a victory by the US led coalition is followed by a surge in outside aid from overtly religious organizations, it would upset a cultural balance that has existed in Iraq for generations.

<http://www.sltrib.com/2003/Apr/04082003/iraq/46013.asp>

A major report in The Observer of 6 April 2003 (based on a report by Ed Helmore in the US) details the problem further, It comments that President Bush is under pressure to clarify his position on the role evangelical Christian aid groups are set to play in post-war Iraq.

'Christian conservatives are among Bush's staunchest supporters, but at a time when much of the Muslim world perceives America as anti-Islam Bush cannot afford the impression that the war is indeed a crusade. US Muslim leaders say that, while Iraqis need aid, the US government should bar groups critical of the faith from working in the region. '

<http://www.observer.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,930793,00.html>

Conclusions

Perhaps not surprisingly the Iraqi Christian diaspora were on the whole more critical of Saddam's regime than Christians living in Iraq were. It does seem that the need to ensure survival as 'A Faithful Presence' affected the way that Christian leaders in Iraq itself related to Saddam Hussein. Christians in Iraq are clearly afraid of the future – and what it may hold for them. Their situation is indeed at the moment very fragile. A great deal of sensitivity will be needed on the part of Western Christians as to the appropriate way to respond to these fears and concerns – on the one hand not ignoring them, but equally not placing Christians in Iraq on a kind of pedestal that encourages Muslims to regard them as natural and inevitable allies of the West. It is probably unhelpful for Christians to be encouraged, for example, into Assyrian nationalist style positions. However it will also be important that mainstream Christian Churches eg the Anglican Communion do not allow there to be a kind of vacuum that is too easily filled by extreme fundamentalist, anti-Muslim groups entering Iraq with the backing particularly of the American government, under the banner of 'aid'. Careful consideration by both religious and political leadership will be necessary to manage this concern. The potential linkage between the realisation of the fears of Iraq's Christians (particularly those of the Catholic/Orthodox traditions) and

the evangelistic/mission orientated activity which is being proposed by Christians from the US is significant and should not be ignored by those in authority.

The particular situation of the north is an issue, and depending on what emerges regarding the relationship between the Kurdish autonomous areas and the rest of Iraq there may need to particular consideration given to the position of Christians in that region. (which is actually the Christian heartland of Iraq – though not the region where most Christians now live.)

Clare Amos, Coordinator, NIFCON, 23 April 2003