

Iraq; Abraham's "Children of a Lesser God" ?

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"Thus were they defiled with their own works." (Psalms 106: 39.) "For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight." (Alexander Pope, 1688-1744.)

Iraqis have been subject to such heights of ritual humiliation, torture, slaughter by the barbarians through the gate, that it is hard be further shocked. Appalled, outraged, reduced to near incoherent rants to public representatives, yes, but shock, seldom.

Now it transpires that America's crusading Christian soldiers are evicting the monks from the monasteries to make quarters for occupation troops, according to Azzaman, (<http://www.azzaman.com> courtesy <http://www.uruknet.info>) Churches too are being evacuated. Patriarch Emanuel Deli, Head of the Chaldean Community in Iraq, is quoted as saying: "U.S. and Iraqi officials are responsible ... They have insulted and humiliated our temples and churches", he said, pleading with the international community to intervene.

U.S. troops, reports Azzaman, "have turned one of Baghdad's largest monasteries, where the Chaldeans had a theology college and seminary, into a military barracks". Nearly every report on soldiers or their families refers to their unwavering faith in God sustaining them in their missions and if they become casualties, belief that they are now with their Maker. Are Iraqi Christians, established in Iraq since the time of Christ, children of a lesser God? Are their rich holy places, revered by them and by their Muslim neighbours suddenly not sacrosanct - some of which have stood for over a thousand years and have survived all of Mesopotamia's bloody invasions and vicissitudes?

The 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property, strengthened by the Additional Protocols of 1977, is specific and prohibits: "... acts of hostility (against) places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples". Article 53 also prohibits to use of such property "in support of the military effort".

After World War II, several Nazi officials were sentenced to death for violations of cultural property and the more recent Yugoslavia War Crimes Tribunal (ICTY) was also empowered to prosecute those deemed responsible for the "seizure of, destruction or wilful damage to institutions dedicated to religion, charity, education ... historic monuments".

From the illegal occupation of palaces, schools, monasteries and destruction of much of the world's wonders, across the country, the US, UK and their dwindling "allies" have committed cultural war crimes of near unprecedented enormity. America's and Britain's finest can only be compared to the Vandals, a Teutonic race who ravaged Gaul, Spain and in 455, Rome itself and have forever become the by-word for ignorant and wilful destruction.

If the soldiers spent time with Patriarch Deli, they would not alone find spiritual sustenance

(should a tiny shred of their soul still remain) but they would learn of Iraq's richness of Christian history – and a unique personal courage. The Patriarch remained in Iraq throughout the forty-two day carpet bombing – which was the first Gulf War – through the massive illegal bombings of 1993, 1996, 1998 and has stayed throughout the invasion. He has comforted and inspired Christian, Muslim and Jew alike, through barely imaginable griefs and during the thirteen year decimating UN embargo. His is faith in action and reverence for those and that which represent it.

Baghdad's fifty churches include the first church to be built by the Syriac Catholics: the Church of the Virgin Mary, opposite the central Shorja market and near the Caliphs mosque, built in the tenth century. The Syriac church is a newcomer, being completed in 1841, but until the invasion, congregations cohabited and celebrated each others feasts and high days, offering gifts and special food dishes, visiting each other's homes. The Armenian Orthodox Church is one of Baghdad's oldest churches and originally belonged to the Nestorians. In ancient Rashid Street, whose great pillars – and balconies, fronted by wrought iron rails, seemingly as delicate and intricate as filigree, the annual service at the Church celebrating the Assumption of the Virgin, was renowned.

The Roman Catholic Church, known as the Latin Church, is built on the spot where the Carmelite Fathers founded a small church in 1731, named after the Apostle St. Thomas.

Iraq's spiritual wealth has long been targeted by the US and its agents.

The nuns too, have fled the convents, states the Patriarch. Zafariniyah, on the outskirts of Baghdad, had a cohesive Christian community, which served its neighbourhood, had a school, orchards, vegetable gardens, growing abundant produce which was given to those who could afford little – regardless of religion. Surrounded by white walls, the entrance through ancient gates, it was a haven of tranquillity. Bougainvillea and hibiscus cascaded around the grotto dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the lush smell of flowers, fruit and produce scented the air.

One day, they had a surprise visit. The great bell at the entrance rang and the ninety-seven year old Mother Superior went to answer it. "There were many men; I was told they had flown all the way from Washington because they had been told we kept weapons of mass destruction in our convent", she told me shortly afterwards. These were the weapons inspectors, before they fled ahead of the Christmas 1998 bombing. The feisty lady, with the mind of a thirty year old, had said tartly: "This is a convent. Even our Bishop makes an appointment to come here. Two of you can come in and the rest of you can wait outside", with which she slammed the great gates shut, she recounted, with a glint in her eye.

One inspector went through rooms, clothes, the kitchen, climbed on to the roof, violating the very sanctuary of the Nuns. The other was left by the telephone, she recounted, so no Sister could make an outgoing call about their plight. Finding nothing, one of them remarked: "This is all very clean."

"Yes, we clean for God here", was the sharp reply. Then they asked to visit the graveyard of the deceased nuns, she said. Hearing that, so did I. "It is a very simple place", she said, as we walked through the sun dappled grounds. It was; no headstones, just a flat rectangle block of local stone to cover each grave, which were laid edge to edge, like a giant chess board, with a wrought iron handle sunk in the middle of each, to raise, or lower.

As the voices of the children leaving the school and their laughter rang out, a chill ran down my spine. From the numerous satellites surveying Iraq, it would look exactly like a missile silo – except that the stone squares covering the graves would be too small by orders of magnitude. Some inept fool in “intelligence”, reading the images, had screwed up, wasted tax payers’ money, man hours and raided a Convent. They also raided a nearby church, terrorising an eighteen year old novice nun, who also thought she might be raped.

Northern Mosul, where ancient historical jewels abound, where the Prophet Jonah is believed buried in the Mosque named for him and whose Muslim places of worship date back to the twelfth century, hosts revered churches and monasteries. They include the 17th century St. George’s Monastery, where pilgrims visit, annually, as the spring flowers, for which the region is famous, form their rich, scented, multi-coloured carpet.

The Cistercian Monastery, St Benham’s (Deir al-Jubb in Arabic) in Nineveh’s lush plain, immortalised by poet John Masefield, in his poem, “Cargoes”: “... quinquene if Nineveh, from distant Ophir ...”, was built in the 12th or 13th century.

There is St Elijah’s Monastery – and the unforgettable, haunting St Matthew’s Monastery, perched on the top of Mount Maqloub, dating back to the 4th century. Affectionately known as Deir Matti, the Saint is believed buried here, in a small, dark, chancel where candles lit by pilgrims dance and light the way. This is the Lourdes of the Middle East, where those of all religions and denominations bring their sick to benefit from the healing powers it is believed the Saint possesses.

The British and Americans, over the embargo years, illegally bombed the villages below, time after time; they bombed flocks of sheep and the child shepherds who minded them, blowing them all to bits, on numerous occasions. On one visit, the blind Priest in charge of the Monastery, walked me, unerringly, down the steps to the plateau on which the building stood. He pointed down to each the villages below and across the plain, knowing exactly where each one was.

“Every day, there are new widows, new widowers, new orphans (from the bombings)there”, he said, of the poorest of the poor. “When you go home, please tell your Mr. Tony Blair, he is a very, very bad man.”

The Ministry of Defence, when asked why they were bombing sheep and child shepherds – as young as five – responded: “We reserve the right to take robust action when threatened.” Shakespeare’s “Anthony and Cleopatra” comes to mind: “The acts of mannish cowards”.

Mosul’s oldest Chaldean church is that of Simon Peter, built in the 13th century, as was the Church of St Thomas. The Church of Al-Tahira (The Immaculate) is thought to be built on an ancient monastery. The Roman Catholic Church was built by the Dominican Fathers, in the Nineteenth Century; the Church of the Clock is named for the clock gifted by the sister of Napoleon. These and numerous others – as across Iraq – have witnessed heartbreak and happiness, since the dawn of Christianity, but it is the first time avowed Christians have threatened and these wondrous, revered, places been defiled.

Under the watch of the British, Patriarch Deli says that southern Basra, previously home to one hundred and fifty thousand Christians, is also being emptied of Christians. Archbishop Khassab was a towering figure in Basra. During the embargo, he established a clinic for the poor of all religions and denominations. His Residence was bombed and when he moved, so

was that one. His third dwelling had no telephone: "What is the point; every time the exchange is rebuilt, it is bombed again ...", he said of the ongoing thirteen year, illegal British and American bombings. Anyway, people knew where to find him.

The Archbishop was especially enraged by the poignant plight of the deceased and the bereaved. Because no imports to repair anything after the 1991 onslaught were permitted by the US/UK dominated UN Sanctions Committee, and repairs resulting from cannibalising parts which were destroyed in the constant bombings, the cemeteries in Basra had a gut wrenching problem. Ruined pipes and a complex water table, now no longer controlled, meant that bodies which had been buried, rose to the surface. "We have to place stone slabs over the bodies now, before we fill in the graves", to counter this problem, he said.

Further, it is not alone the invaders, George Bush's crusaders, who are threatening the Christian community which previously flourished in formally secular Iraq. The fundamentalist armed militias they brought in with them are warning Christians to convert to Islam, or leave. They are being forced out by: "... armed groups who are in control in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and other cities", says Patriarch Deli.

Two hundred and fifty thousand Christians are believed to have fled Iraq since the invasion. The Mehdi Army is reportedly imposing the wearing of the veil on Christian women. Whilst the silence is deafening from the "we pray together" Bush and Blair regimes, messages of solidarity are arriving from world powers, including Russia.

"The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has recently sent a letter to the Russian Assyrian Committee and Moscow Assyrian Ethno-Cultural Autonomy Organization, which guarantees that in Moscow's contacts 'with representatives of Iraqi authorities and international partners we delicately try to let them understand the need of ensuring conditions for preserving of original culture of Iraqi Christians, their adequate representation in Governmental structures, achievement of civil peace considering legal interests of all confessions and non-admission of discrimination of ethno-religious minorities'", states Azzaman.

On May 30th, in order to bring international attention to the plight of Christians in danger of extinction, Ankawa.com (<http://www.ankawa.com>) – based in Sweden – launched a protest march in Stockholm, in which exiled Iraqi Christians also took part, as well as other religious minorities who have fled Iraq.

"I plead with the world countries and human rights organizations to stop the violations being committed against Iraqi minorities", says the Patriarch.

In the UK, no one from the office of the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Cormac Murphy O'Connor, could be reached for comment, or at Lambeth Palace, residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Tariq Aziz, Iraq's Christian Foreign Minister (still, since the invasion is illegal) might well have had something to say, but he is – shamefully – held, without charge by the US military.

In the "cradle of civilisation" where Abraham, Father of Christianity, Islam and Judaism was believed born at Ur, his children, of all religions and denominations, it seems, are now those of a lesser God – as the Yazidis, Zoroastrians and Mandeans, the forgotten minorities, safe under a "tyrant", now doomed under the fundamentalist US/UK's crusading army of God.

Felicity Arbuthnot is a journalist and activist who has visited the Arab and Muslim world on numerous occasions. She has written and broadcast on Iraq, her coverage of which was nominated for several awards. She was also senior researcher for John Pilger's award-winning documentary "Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq". <http://www.johnpilger.com/page.asp?partID=4> and author, with Nikki van der Gaag, of "Baghdad" in the "Great Cities" series, for World Almanac Books (2006.)

Please also see:

Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict - 1954

http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8450&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

<http://www.un.org/icty>

Soldiers of God Invade US Markets

http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1180421174769&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout

Iraq's "Year Zero" (By Felicity Arbuthnot)

<http://www.turkishweekly.net/news.php?id=45243>

Felicity Arbuthnot: The Second Fall of Babylon

<http://www.unobserver.com/index.php?pagina=layout5.php&id=3396&blz=1>

Felicity Arbuthnot: Erasing History

<http://www.unobserver.com/index.php?pagina=layout5.php&id=3384&blz=1>

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