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Comment: *Christians in Iraq*

'He's worrisome about the Christians inside Iraq being mistreated by the Muslim majority', so President George W. Bush reported after his June meeting at the Vatican with Pope Benedict XVI ('a very smart, loving man'). The United States was working hard to ensure that the Iraqi people live up to their constitution in treating the Christian minority fairly, so the President reassured him. One doubts if the Pope was taken in.

Iraq as a state collapsed, not surprisingly, after twelve years during which the largely secular professional middle class was impoverished and corrupted by UN-imposed economic sanctions, followed by the 'shock and awe' destruction of public services (sewerage, electricity, etc.), and then the calamitous decisions to dismiss the civil service and disband the army.

As the fantasy of creating a pro-American, pro-Israeli capitalist democracy gives way to the likelihood of an anti-American, pro-Iranian theocracy arising from the ruins, once US troops withdraw, Christians would do best to emigrate. As many as 50 percent may already have taken refuge in Syria and Jordan. With a few shot for selling liquor and other goods prohibited by Islamic law, women having to wear the veil, pressure to convert to Islam in exchange for guarantees of their safety, their children kidnapped on the way to school, since doctors and lawyers and suchlike are thought to be able to ransom them, and anyway have no tribal network to shield them — these are just the beginning of the end for the ancient Christian communities in Mesopotamia.

There are a few native Iraqi Presbyterians. The Catholic community is much larger, including 200 Dominicans, Sisters and priests, all native Iraqis. Most Christians, however, belong to the Church of the East, split in the 16th century between the Chaldeans, who went into communion with Rome, and the Assyrians. Neither name is very helpful. That the local Christians are descended from the ancient Assyrians was first suggested by Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817-94), the excavator of Babylon and Nineveh. The name was popularized by William Ainger Wigram (1872-1953), a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission (1885-1915). Naturally, but unfortunately, the Assyrians sided with the British during the First World War, after which they were subjected to severe reprisals in the north of the

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country from both Ottoman Turks and Kurds. Flocking to the south and the safety of the British Mandate, they were again vulnerable when that ended in 1933. Hatred of Iraqi Christians by zealous Muslims for collaborating with the British has a history.

In the present conflict Iraqi Christians have worked as guides and interpreters for British and especially US troops. A few have been killed in action against insurgents, others murdered as traitors.

Iraqi Christians now fear that the rising tide of anti-Christian violence shows that the US army cannot protect them. They have begun to fear that even if it could, there is no will to do so. *The Wall Street Journal* has reported that US policy makers in Iraq consider the Christians to be a 'most inconvenient minority'. Showing too much concern for Iraqi Christians, it is feared, would reinforce the idea that the US is fighting a 'war on Islam', thereby legitimizing the resistance of the Muslim insurgents.

At last a majority of US citizens have begun to question the sense of the war. President Bush, however, stands ready to lose soldiers, money, and equipment, as well as his country's reputation, for the rest of his term in office. These are losses that will be grievous, but as a nation the United States will survive.

Iraqi Christians, in contrast, stand to lose everything. Given the rhetoric of many Republican politicians one would expect them to care about the fate of Christian minorities. Prior to the invasion, however, no conservative politicians expressed concern over what it would mean for the Christian minorities. The Evangelical Christian base of the Republican Party seems uninterested. There have been no protests against the inability/unwillingness of US forces to protect Iraqi Christians. Their cause has not been championed by any of the televangelists. Persecution of Christians in post-Saddam Iraq has not appeared as an issue in any of the Evangelical magazines. At the same time, however, there have been large protests against President Bush's 'Roadmap for Peace,' a plan many Evangelicals oppose as being too tough on the Israelis. The message is clear to Christian minorities in the Middle East – Israel matters and you don't. That is the perception.

According to President Bush, the Pope did not raise the question of 'just war', the old idea that war must be a last resort, in response to unjust aggression, and with a reasonable chance of not doing more harm than good. For the Christian minorities, at least, as the Pope surely knows, it was too late.

Fergus Kerr OP

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