



MIDDLE EAST MINORITIES INITIATIVE

## **“Iraq: Faith through the centuries”**

**By: Tom Holland\***

In AD 781, the Caliph Al-Mahdi summoned the leading churchman of his empire to recently-founded Baghdad, there to debate with him the rival merits of Christianity and Islam. Patriarch Timothy did not hesitate. He had no reason to feel nervous. Christianity was thriving in the Middle East. It was Christians, not Muslims, who formed the majority in the Caliphate. The notion that the future of their faith might lie in the barbarous lands of the West, rather than in the Fertile Crescent, would have struck Timothy as ludicrous. It was in the East, after all, that “Jesus Christ walked in the flesh 33 years on the earth”; in the East that the Church’s greatest saints, scholars and ascetics had lived. Even as Timothy debated with the Caliph, missionaries were preaching the Gospel to the Chinese and the Turks. A bishopric was planned for “the peoples of Tibet.” How distant now the world of Timothy seems.

Today, Christianity stands at risk of extinction in the lands of its birth. The calamity has been a long time brewing. The Middle Ages saw Christians progressively lose their majority status in the region. The collapse of Byzantium then confirmed Islam’s status as its dominant religion. By the beginning of the 20th century, Christians represented just over 10 percent of its total population. Even so, had the Middle East remained what it had been for the previous two and a half millennia, a patchwork of different faiths ruled by distant emperors, they might well have clung on to their ancestral lands. As it was, the replacement of the Ottoman Empire by new and fissile nation states spelt longterm disaster for the Christians of the region. Ethnically cleansed completely from Turkey, they lacked what the Jews in due course managed to carve out for themselves: a defensible homeland. Over the course of the 20th century, a combination of political impotence and economic hardship led millions to

emigrate. Then, in the early years of the third Christian millennium, came the coup de grâce.

It is a bitter irony that the invasion of Iraq in 2003, launched under the aegis of two devoutly Christian leaders, George Bush and Tony Blair, should have heralded what threatens to be the final ruin of Christianity in the Middle East. It was Iraqi Christians, trapped between the militancy of their Muslim compatriots and the studied disinterest of their Western co-religionists, who bore the initial brunt of the savagery. Extortion, kidnapping and murder became their daily fare. The venerable churches of Mesopotamia, ancient even in the days of Patriarch Timothy, have suffered a terrible reaping. The warning given in 2010 by an Al-Qaida front group, that “the doors of destruction and rivers of blood will be opened upon them,” has become all too real.

It was not Al-Qaida, though, but the Islamic State which wrought the most terrible persecution. The arrival in northern Iraq of their fighters in the summer of 2014 resulted in a murderous intensification of their suffering. Assyria - the region around Mosul - had long been a stronghold of the Christian faith. Its roots were very ancient. In AD 362, so it is said, the daughter of the Assyrian king, dying of an incurable illness, was restored to full health by the prayers of a local Christian saint. So impressed by this miracle was her brother, Prince Behnam, that he turned his back on his ancestral religion and accepted baptism. His martyrdom, though, swiftly followed; for Behnam’s father, outraged by his apostasy, had him put to death. When the king in turn fell sick, his wife had a dream which revealed that only his own baptism would serve to cure him. The king, bowing to the inevitable, not only agreed to become a Christian, but to found a number of monasteries. One of them, named after his son, was established near the city of Mosul. From the 4th century until the present day, the monastery of Saint Behnam served as a monument to the enduring Christian faith of the Assyrian people. Then, three years ago, Islamic State fighters turned up. “You have no place here anymore,” they told the monks, before blowing up Saint Behnam’s monastery.

This expulsion was part of a much broader process of ethnic cleansing. The capture by ISIS of Mosul had brought the heartlands of Assyrian Christianity under the rule of jihadists so murderous that even Al-Qaeda expressed revulsion at their methods. The jizya, a Qur’anicallly-mandated tax on Christians that served in effect as a license for extortion, was imposed with such rapacious brutality that most Iraqi Assyrians were left with no choice but to flee their ancestral homeland. Saint Behnam’s

monastery was not the only church to be demolished. In Mosul too, masses stopped being said for the first time in over one-and-a-half thousand years.

ISIS now stand on the verge of defeat. Their caliphate has been shredded almost to nothing, not just in Iraq but in Syria, where for years Syrian Christians have suffered similar exactions and murders to their Iraqi brothers and sisters. Yet the defeat of ISIS does not mean that they can breathe easily. There are many other Islamic fighters in Syria who doubly excoriate them in terms similar to those of ISIS propaganda: as kuffar and as Assad stooges. In a country where churches have been systematically desecrated, nuns and bishops kidnapped, individual Christians forced at gunpoint to convert to Islam, or else slaughtered in cold blood, how can any Christian have confidence in the future? Meanwhile, in Egypt, where the Copts form the largest community of Christians left in the Middle East, similar questions are being asked, after a year which has already seen carnage inflicted on pilgrims, and on worshippers on Palm Sunday. At risk is a future where Muslims in the Middle East, if they want to do as the Caliph al-Mahdi did, and discuss their religion with a Christian, will have precious few left to invite round.

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Although known for being an author of history, Holland has also written several novels, including a series revolving around a fictional Lord Byron becoming a vampire (The Vampyre). He currently lives in London with his wife and daughters.

#### Book and writing awards:

Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic won the Hessel-Tiltman Prize for History and was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize.