

Christians in the Crossfire

Pro-war evangelicals have made exiles—and martyrs—of Iraqi believers.

By Doug Bandow

THE KILLING IN IRAQ continues, and support for the occupation is waning even among Christian conservatives. It would likely fall further if they were aware of what Fred Markert, director of Terra Nova missions, calls the “horrible, horrible climate for Christians in Iraq.”

Before the invasion, Christians argued over the criteria of a just war. But Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, asked another question: had war supporters “thought about their obligation to the Christian community in Iraq?”

Most leading evangelicals seemed to accept blithely the administration’s war rationale. For instance, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson said President Bush’s arguments justified the invasion: “Of course, all of this presupposes solid intelligence.” Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, pointed to Saddam’s development “at breakneck speed of weapons of mass destruction he plans to use against America and her allies” and the “direct line from those who attacked the U.S. [on 9/11] back to the nation of Iraq.” D. James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, blustered, “Why any churchman would choose to support [Saddam Hussein] rather than to support our own president, I don’t know.” Pat Robertson proclaimed that “carping criticism” of President Bush “amounts to treason.” James Dobson of Focus on the Family opined, “Saddam Hussein must be stopped. Appeasement of tyrants is

never successful.” Gary Bauer, chairman of the Campaign for Working Families, said, “Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was a hell hole of torture and mass murder” and “he allowed Iraq to become a safe haven for terrorists.” Rev. Jerry Falwell wrote an article entitled simply: “God is Pro-War.” In his view, “Christians must live as Galatians 6:2 instructs: ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens.’”

About the only Christian leader who considered the fate of her Iraqi coreligionists was Roberta Combs of the Christian Coalition, who declared in November 2003: “In the new country, under the new democracy, why should the official religion be Muslim? I think as Iraq becomes a democracy, there are going to be a lot of churches springing up.”

Alas, most of these arguments proved to be illusory. The result is a tragic irony for Christians: while the invasion opened Iraq to evangelism, it also unleashed a violent tsunami that is driving many believers abroad. As Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals, observes, evangelicals strongly supported the war yet “their cobelievers are suffering as a result.”

Unsurprisingly, Saddam Hussein did not exactly provide a warm home for Christianity. Nevertheless, Samuel Rizk, a spokesman for the Beirut-based Middle East Council of Churches, noted in July 2003: “There’s not much you can say about the old regime. But one thing you could say is that Christians enjoyed freedom to worship.” Hussein used Christians to help provide political bal-

ance. Still, living under a brutal dictatorship and international sanctions is hard, and the number of Christians fell from 1.4 million to 1.2 million or even fewer during the 1990s.

Saddam’s ouster led to a dramatic increase in indigenous evangelism and an influx of foreign Christians, including American troops. “A lot of Iraqis were seeing Christianity for the first time,” observes Jim Jacobson, president of Christian Freedom International. The result was an “explosion of conversions” and “underground, nondenominational churches.” However, notes Mindy Belz, international editor of *World*, that growth “tapered off as things have gotten worse.”

In short, “there is a very important window of opportunity,” as Jacobson puts it, which “probably will close soon.”

Many Iraqi Christians fear that this window has already shut. Solaka Enweya, who fled to Syria with his three sons, told the *New York Times*: “When we heard that the Americans were going to liberate Iraq, we were so happy. Yet our suffering has only increased.”

So far the government does not itself oppress, but Christians live—and die—in fear. They are targeted for robbery, extortion, and kidnapping because of their perceived wealth and the belief that they likely have foreign relatives with money. Christians also suffer from insurgent and sectarian violence. Car bombs don’t discriminate; U.S. translators are killed irrespective of their religion. Carl Moeller of Open Doors USA

says, "Christians find themselves literally caught in the crossfire."

Iraq's Christian leaders commonly argues that Christians are targeted no more than Muslims are. But even if that is true, Christians are uniquely vulnerable because their religious communities and geographical enclaves are much smaller. Nor do they possess an armed militia for defense. And most observers believe this claim to be a vain attempt to reduce Muslim attacks and Christian fears. After visiting Iraq, Lawrence F. Kaplan of *The New Republic* wrote: "however much the clergy may deny it, Iraqi Christians suffer for their faith." Carl Moeller agrees: "Christians are targeted specifically for being Christians." CFI warns of "a silent reign of terror" against Iraqi Christians.

Most Iraqi Christians feel like human targets. One problem is identification with America, even though Washington has been reluctant to offer any assistance. Notes business analyst Glen Chancy: "Evidencing too much concern for Iraqi Christians, it is feared, would reinforce the idea that the U.S. is fighting a 'war on Islam.'" But the real issue is that they are not Muslims. Younadam Kanna, elected to the Iraqi parliament in 2005, told Kaplan: "The fanatics ... blame us for being Christian." Earlier this year Chaldean Catholic Bishop Rabban Al Qas of Amadiyah and Erbil said church bombings were part of "the continuing attempt by Arab fanatics to push the Christians out of Iraq."

Attacks on Christians started early and have steadily increased. In February 2004 Paul Marshall of Freedom House warned that one sign of increasing Islamic extremism was the targeting of religious minorities. The co-ordinated bombing of five churches in mid-2004 triggered the first mass exodus of Christians overseas, perhaps 30,000 to 40,000.

Car bombs were soon used around churches. By Christmas 2004, people feared attending religious services.

Violence also escalated against shops that sold alcohol and music, most of which were owned by Christians. Their stores were bombed and robbed; owners were kidnapped and murdered. Christian women were harassed for not wearing hijab. Some had acid thrown on them or were killed.

George Mushe, a Chaldean Catholic who fled from Baghdad to Istanbul with his family of five, told freelance journalist Yigal Schleifer, "Before the war they looked at us as different, but we could go to church, to work." Afterwards that became impossible, since if you leave your family "you don't know if you will see them again."

Iraqi Christians tell wrenching stories that are repetitive in their barbarity: fathers murdered, children killed and maimed, relatives kidnapped and tortured, families imprisoned at home, businesses destroyed, jobs lost, churches abandoned. The Christians of Iraq website includes an 18-page list compiled by historian Fred Aprim of violent acts beginning in April 2003 and running through July 2006.

Although violence is worst in Baghdad, it reaches even into Kurdistan, where the political authorities are hostile. Last year, reported Kaplan, the Kurdish religious affairs minister said, "those who turn to Christianity pose a threat to society."

Although virtually all Iraqi Christians were pleased to be rid of Saddam, some now say the unthinkable: they were better off under him. Even Richard Land told me that it is "very sad and tragic" that "Christians have had their level of suffering increased by the overthrow of Saddam." Shea and Rayis were more blunt: "The Chaldo-Assyrians have endured much throughout the last century in Iraq, including brutal Arabization and Islamization campaigns. But this current period may see their last stand as a cohesive community" before the

Christian minority is "driven out of its ancestral homeland."

Many Christians have fled, especially to Syria, despite its bad reputation in America. In contrast, the U.S. accepted barely 200 Iraqi Christians last year. The administration simply denies the existence of religious persecution since doing otherwise would suggest that its Iraq policy was failing, explained *The New Republic's* Kaplan.

Estimates of the number of Iraqi Christian refugees vary widely. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees figured that roughly 36 percent of the 700,000 Iraqis who had fled to Syria as of March 2005 were Christians. Bishop Andreos Abouna recently estimated that about half of Iraq's pre-war 1.2 million Christians had left the country. However, Mindy Belz says, "I tend to question those numbers, though I don't have any way of refuting them." For instance, these estimates might not reflect the growth of evangelical congregations. Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, believes that "some of the slack has been taken up by independent churches." Still no one doubts a substantial Christian exodus that could eventually eliminate the historic Iraqi Christian church. Johnson told me that "emigration is really the biggest thing" in Iraq today. Standard statistical projections are of dubious value in a nation convulsed by conflict: "many have fled in the last three to four months," he notes.

Will they return? Bishop Abouna retains some hope—"once stability returns." But an authoritarian Shi'ite state would provide the wrong kind of stability.

The problem is not confined to Iraq. Carl Moeller says that the actions and words of the U.S. government "have caused great harm to Christians on the ground all over the Muslim world." Similarly, Jim Jacobson observes that

“everything we do has become much more difficult and dangerous because of Iraq.” Radical Islamists “can’t strike at us, so they strike at people they think of as surrogates for us,” he adds.

Afghanistan’s threat to execute Christian convert Abdul Rahman this spring was “a huge wake-up call for a lot of people in the evangelical Christian population,” notes Jacobson. It demonstrated that “democracy isn’t the only answer and it does not resolve problems of religious persecution and problems of the heart.”

Oddly, the American evangelical leadership that campaigned for war has paid little attention to the catastrophe enveloping Iraq’s Christians. Few notables acknowledge any need to rethink the war. Chuck Colson and Pat Robertson said they were too busy to comment. Roberta Combs and D. James Kennedy failed to respond to my calls. Schedulers for Rev. Falwell and Dr. Dobson at least made an effort to accommodate my request for comment.

Richard Land acknowledged the problem of increased violence, though he contended that Christians “are not being treated any differently than Muslims in Muslim on Muslim violence.” Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, made a similar argument: “the fact of the matter is that a lot of people are being shot and were being shot before” by Saddam. “In Iraq everyone is getting killed,” so he doesn’t consider Christian persecution to be a “tragic irony,” even though it “is a horrible situation.”

Land defends his support for the war, blaming current problems on the inadequate numbers of troops, “one area of Bush policy that I have disagreed with from the beginning.” But is there something more? Land acknowledges that building democracy in the Mideast “is going to be difficult.” But it “is difficult in large parts of the world,” like

Yugoslavia. Despite all the problems, Iraq “is a battle that we cannot lose,” he believes.

Cromartie seems a bit more pessimistic. He says he is listening to the ongoing conservative debate over whether “there is a culture that can be democratized” in the Mideast. He acknowledges that “culture and tradition are very important and need to be weighed before trying to reshuffle the decks of a very nasty place.” Obviously, we can’t “believe that the opening of a society means it will stay open.”

Gary Bauer forthrightly acknowledges that “this has been one of the things that has really troubled me, and I’m a strong supporter of what the president is trying to do.” Although Bauer had thought building democracy in the Mideast “would be a positive development,” it is evident that we are not “dealing with a people who have a concept of Western values and the value of liberty.” In the Middle East, when people make democratic decisions they end up “persecuting those of different religious persuasions.” The experience in Iraq has “really pointed out the shortcomings” in the administration’s policy, despite “the noble goals.”

Several evangelical leaders with experience in the region point to the administration’s failure to recognize the power of culture and religion. The expectation of easily planting liberal democracy abroad was “naïve,” says Richard Cizik, ignoring “very deep suspicions of American power.” Carl Moeller notes that it “is a far more nuanced and complicated situation in the Mideast than many Christians and Americans understand.” Fred Markert is even more direct. “The idea of freedom is at the very core of the Gospel message. The opposite philosophy is at the core of the Koran.” He doesn’t believe that liberal democracy can take root until local people and institutions are transformed

through Judeo-Christian ideas, a process that “there is no way to fast track.” Military intervention just “can’t solve problems of the human heart.”

Given this reality, Cizik told me that “evangelicals need to be really careful not to identify themselves with Caesar.” Today, alas, “evangelicals are perceived by Muslims in the Mideast as being in league with the Pentagon. The soldiers come first and then the missionaries,” he explains. In the case of Iraq, “Evangelicals trusted the president’s perception of the threat. I was wrong. Without casting blame, the threat was misunderstood, and some would say purposefully.”

U.S. policymakers may not give much consideration to the status of foreign Christian communities. But religious activists, especially evangelicals who talk about spreading the Gospel, should make fellow believers a high priority.

At the time of the Abdul Rahman controversy, Tony Perkins, president of Family Research Council, argued, “Religious freedom is not just ‘an important element’ of democracy; it is its cornerstone.” If Islamic states “don’t democratize in a way that protects religious freedom, it’s almost not worth doing.”

Sadly, that appears to be the case in Iraq. Writes Paul Marshall of Freedom House, the U.S. risks presiding “over the demise of one of Iraq’s, and the world’s, most ancient religions and peoples.” Evangelical leaders might still believe that the Iraq War was worth supporting. But they should reflect seriously on what has happened to their fellow believers. As Catholic Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk said earlier this year, Iraq’s Christian community is becoming “once again a church of martyrs.” ■

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George Winston Bush?

Invocations of Munich and a parade of new Hitlers won't be enough to convince Americans that this is a good war.

By Leon Hadar

SIR—Please do not ever mention George Bush. And Winston Churchill in the same sentence again, even if you must break all the rules of grammar to do so. Steve Pettit, California (Letter to the editor, The Economist, May 25, 2006)

BASIL FAWLTY is not a political consultant, nor does he play one on television. But I wish George W. Bush and his loyal band would follow the advice dispensed by Basil, the owner of the Fawltly Towers hotel, during episode six of one of the best-known British television comedies of all time. “Don’t mention the war!” Basil, the irascible Torquay hotel owner played by John Cleese, warns his crew after learning that a group of German tourists are staying there.

Unfortunately, after receiving a knock to the head rendering him even less sensitive than before, Basil cannot stop mentioning the war at every opportunity, upsetting the German guests more and more. In one memorable scene he is goose-stepping around the dining room and rapidly descending into a fit of xenophobic ranting about everything and everyone that most Germans would rather forget. When an angry German asks Basil to stop going on about the war, he reminds him that they started it. “We did not start it,” protests the German. “Yes you did, you invaded Poland,” replies Basil.

Like Basil who can’t stop mentioning the war, the Bushies haven’t been able to stop exploiting the same war and its

“lessons” since the World Trade Center collapsed. In fact, during one of his many press conferences held just one day after the attack, New York City mayor and Bush ally Rudolph Giuliani told the crowd that he had been reading historian John Lukacs’s book *Five Days in London*, which delves into Winston Churchill’s decisions during what the author considers a critical moment in the history of World War II.

At first it sounded to me like Mayor Giuliani, inspired by how Churchill and the people of London reacted during the war, was trying to lift the morale his fellow New Yorkers. Nothing wrong with that. But then the cynic in me was reminded that Giuliani was considering running for the White House and his heroic Churchill-like pose would clearly be more stirring in a campaign television commercial than comparing himself to this or that Lord Mayor of London responding to the devastation of his city by an IRA terrorist bomb.

But then I didn’t know Winnie. Winnie wasn’t a good friend of mine. Perhaps there was something very Churchillian in Hizzonor?

John Lukacs, whose book Giuliani was reading around 9/11—the mayor actually carried the book with him, at least when television cameras were around—knows quite a lot about Churchill and in an interview with *Newsweek*, ten days after the 9/11 attack, made it clear that no, Mr. Mayor, you’re not Churchill, Osama bin Laden is not Adolf Hitler, and the war on terrorism is

not World War II. “I’m very pleased that Mayor Giuliani held up my book. That was very pleasant,” Lukacs, an old-world-style gentleman, told *Newsweek*. “But I don’t think there are any parallels. This crisis we now face, no matter what the president says, is not a war. It’s not the first war of the 21st century. A war is something between nations or states or sometimes even tribes. Who are we going to declare war on?” Declaring “war on terrorism” was “just rhetoric,” Lukacs explained. “But aren’t there parallels between what Churchill was facing as a leader and what George W. Bush was now facing?” the magazine interviewer insisted. And how about the way George W. Bush was carrying himself? Doesn’t he have the stature of a Churchill? Bush and Churchill “are very different personalities,” the Hungarian-born historian, who lived in Europe during World War II, patiently noted. “And this is really not the time to criticize a president, but neither his capacity nor his character is comparable. And character is what counts. Intellect without character is not worth anything.” Ouch.

Sounding a cautionary note, Lukacs went on to tell *Newsweek* that Bush and his aides “should use more sober language instead of talking about crusades. The trouble with people who use this kind of rhetoric is that they don’t even know that it’s rhetoric.”

But since 9/11, through the hunt for Osama bin Laden (“Wanted: Dead or Alive!”), the search for Iraq’s WMD (“mushroom cloud”), the anticipation of