

are now with their Maker. Are Iraqi Christians, established in Iraq since the time of Christ, children of a lesser God?

Arbuthnot condemns the senseless destruction the invasion brought on this, "the cradle of civilization," and its priceless historic sites. Ur was the birthplace of the patriarch Abraham. Now some of Abraham's children, who were "safe under a 'tyrant,'" appear "doomed" under a "crusading army of God."

Iraq's Christian community has indeed declined rapidly since the invasion of March 2003. Most reports estimate the pre-war Christian population of Iraq at 800,000 to over a million; since then, the number has dropped by at least one half, and perhaps two thirds, as Christians have fled to Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. Some Christians, hoping to remain in the land of their ancestors, are now calling for the creation of an autonomous Christian region within Iraq on the plains of Nineveh, described by Christian journalist Sandro Magister as "the historical cradle of Christianity in Iraq," an area where village churches

still use Aramaic, the language of Christ, in their liturgy. Many had already moved to the northern part of the country controlled by the Kurds—but faced persecution there, as well.

Observers have begun to use the term *genocide* to describe what is happening to non-Muslims in Iraq. Will Christians somehow be able to sustain themselves there? One journalist lamented

the potentially irreversible loss of the indigenous Christian community in Iraq. Unless something is done and quickly, the lasting legacy of this war will be the genocide of the Christians and other minorities of Iraq.

The loss would be a huge one, not only for Christendom, but for Iraq, since Christians made up a significant portion of the country's professional class of doctors, teachers, and engineers. How could there ever be a "free and democratic Iraq" without them?

What were they thinking? I am referring not only to the neocons, who did so much

to bring on this war, but the pro-war evangelical Christians in America who have enthusiastically backed this disaster and substantially continue to do so, long after the mythical weapons of mass destruction, along with the fabricated "evidence" allegedly proving Saddam was Osama bin Laden's ally, have been dropped from public statements by the likes of Secretary of State Rice and Vice President Cheney. If confronted with Arbuthnot's question, what would they say? That the Christians of Iraq are not really Christians? That they didn't count in the larger calculus of their Praise Leader President's war "to end tyranny in the world"?

Perhaps *they* are the ones who are not wholly Christian, but members of a messianic cult whose temple is Wal-Mart, their patriotic shopping trips accompanied by a sound track of "Christian rock." That they are ignorant is no excuse: Shouldn't anyone who is willing to send others to die, spreading "democracy" at the tip of a sword, be minimally acquainted with public and international affairs? Small wonder that the Founding Fathers saw mass democracy as a danger to liberty. <◇>

CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

A day or two after the signing of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993, I attended a meeting at a think tank in Washington to discuss the economic prospects of an independent Palestinian state. One of the speakers outlined a very economically bullish vision for the new Palestine—the West Bank plus the Gaza Strip. First, tourists would flood the area—Christian pilgrims to Bethlehem, and northern Europeans to Gaza's beaches. Commerce would probably flourish, with Palestine becoming a financial center for the Arab world. Then the Palestinians, known as the "Jews of the Arab World," and the Israelis would help transform Palestine into the "Singapore of the Middle East." At that, the audience applauded.

Indeed, during the booming and swinging years of the 1990's, everyone was applying East Asian models to forecast a productive and rosy future for their economies. Yasser Arafat envisioned the area becoming the "Hong Kong of the Middle East," a small strip of land on which hundreds of thousands of hard-

working Arab and foreign entrepreneurs would lay the foundations for a world-class business center.

One of the participants in the think-tank event sounded a bit skeptical. "In theory, you might be right," he responded to the Palestine-as-Singapore proposal. After all, the Palestinians, Christians and Muslims alike, are indeed very industrious and hard-working people, more educated and cosmopolitan than those of other Arab communities. Many of the Palestinians who have immigrated to the Persian Gulf, North America, and Europe have earned multiple academic degrees and have made a lot of money. In fact, according to a recent study, Palestinian Christian citizens of Israel have the highest level of education and wealth *per capita* in the state. *In theory*, there is no reason why they and their compatriots would not be able to excel and prosper in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, or, for that matter, Gaza City. Lebanon and the emerging dynamic economic centers of Dubai and Qatar have demonstrated that there is no reason why, *in theory*, the Arab Middle East could not produce its own

version of Singapore and Hong Kong. But, as the skeptic pointed out, "in theory, Congo, endowed with huge reserves of natural resources and vast potential wealth should have, by now, become one of the world's richest countries."

Unfortunately, to apply one of the most worn-out clichés in the book of Friedmanism (Tom, not Milton), when it came to Palestine and many other parts of the Arab Middle East (including even Lebanon), the Olive Tree—that symbol of nationalism, ethnicity, and religion—has overpowered the Computer Chip (economic progress). Moreover, Arafat and his cohorts of the corrupt and bloody—and worst of all, incompetent—warlords of the ruling Fatah movement are just the latest example of the way failed leaders of some national movements (the Irish, the Kurds, the Armenians, and even the Poles come to mind) can guide their people to the gates of Hell and never-ending repression and suffering, instead of to the Promised Land of freedom.

Leaders of "failed nations" refrain from sharing in the responsibility for the tragic fate of their people and like to engage in

“victimology,” blaming everything (geography, history, bad luck) and everyone (the “other,” great powers, the “international community”) for their misery. And sometimes, they do have a point. Forty years of “enlightened” Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, coupled with the appropriation of Palestinian land, the establishment of illegal Jewish settlements, the military repression, and the destruction of the Palestinian economy, is responsible for a great deal of the individual and collective suffering of the residents of the West Bank and Gaza. The Israelis must be faulted for their failure to get rid of the refugee camps in the occupied Arab territories and should attempt to resettle their residents. And, contrary to the conventional wisdom, the Israeli offers in the 2000 Camp David negotiations were not so “generous” as Jerusalem and Washington had spun them, and the responsibility for the failure of those talks did not fall squarely on the shoulders of the Palestinians.

The current mess in Palestine/Israel, not unlike the mess in the Persian Gulf and the Levant, has been a direct result of the Bush administration’s policies and, more specifically, the contradictions between its Wilsonian pretensions of spreading political and economic freedom in the Middle East and its more calculated goals of maintaining U.S. hegemony in the region. Hence, rejecting the advice of both the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Washington pressed for open and free elections in Palestine. Then, to the surprise of the Bush administration, the very first one resulted in the defeat of Abbas’s corrupt and ineffective Fatah party and in the triumph of Hamas, which had clearly stated its refusal to recognize Israel and its commitment to an Islamist political agenda that runs contrary to American values and interests.

Just as the elections in Iraq brought to power a Shiite regime with ties to Iran, and just as the elections in Lebanon strengthened the power of the Shiite Hezbollah, the election in Palestine handed power to the offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that opposes the idea of peace in Israel. In response, not only did the Bush administration decide against engaging the new Hamas government in hopes of reaching interim accords, it also took steps, backed by the European Union, to isolate the Hamas government diplomatically and economically, and pressed Abbas and Fatah to

form a counterbalancing center of power against Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank. And the Bush administration was certainly not supportive of an agreement between Hamas and Fatah, reached under Saudi mediation, to form a national-unity government.

Instead, the White House encouraged the Israelis to arm the security forces allied with Abbas, forces led by Fatah’s Mohammed Dahlan, who lives in Gaza and who is known for his close ties to the Americans and the Israelis. Fearing an anti-Hamas insurgency led by Dahlan, in late June, Hamas security forces attacked and eventually devastated the Dahlan-led Fatah guerillas in Gaza, establishing full control in that area. That was a clear upset for the American strategy of crushing Hamas. And President Bush and his aides are now trying to spin that setback by proposing to help form the nucleus of a Western-oriented Palestinian entity led by Abbas and his Fatah faction in the West Bank, while continuing to isolate and eventually strangle Hamas-controlled Gaza.

So, yes, the Americans have exhibited a lack of even-handedness in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Bush and his neoconservative aides helped turn a bloody mess into a bloody catastrophe. At the end of the day, however, it’s the ineptitude and corruption of the Palestinian “leaders” that has brought the Palestinian people to this tragic point in their history, in which Gaza City is looking less and less like Singapore and Hong Kong and more and more like Mogadishu or Grozny. This is a tragedy not only for the Palestinians but for the Israelis, who, like their Siamese twins, are doomed to share the territory of the Holy Land with them for many years to come.

—Leon Hadar

CHRISTIAN RIGHT CONSPIRACY

Paul Krugman is a professor of economics at Princeton University who, in his eagerness to obtain appointive office in a future Democratic administration, has moonlighted for some years now as a columnist for the *New York Times*, where he has worked assiduously to develop talking points for Democratic candidates. His ambition is transparent, and it is sometimes entertaining to watch him daintily avert his eyes from Clinton-era scandals while taking on the machinations of the Bush administration. (Neither of

the present authors, it must be stressed, has much sympathy for the Bushies, who have striven heroically to cover themselves in something other than glory.)

Alas, however, Professor Krugman strayed far from his vocation in the dismal science with his column of April 13, 2007, entitled “For God’s Sake.” The target of his wrath was the temerity of the Regent University School of Law—an openly Christian law school located in Virginia Beach. Regent’s crime? It succeeded in placing 150 graduates in the Bush administration. No good Ivy Leaguer can allow such bumptiousness to pass unnoticed.

The sheer uppityness of those folks at Regent probably pushed him over the edge. What else could explain the tone and tenor of the column? Professor Krugman tries to deny that he is a conspiracy theorist even while proving that the paranoid style is alive and well. Like some latter-day Joe McCarthy, Tail-Gunner Paul has here in his hand a list of 150 graduates of Regent University now working in the Bush administration. Although “the Christian right’s strategy of infiltration” into the corridors of power has been set back by the administration’s current political travails, Krugman ominously intones, “it would be wildly premature to declare the danger over. This is a movement that has shown great resilience over the years.”

What Tail-Gunner Paul cannot stand is “the sheer extremism of these people.” Why, just look at the extreme things that “these people” do! Take the new U.S. attorney for Minnesota—she’s actually “in the habit of quoting Bible verses in the office.” What kind of crazy country are we living in? We’d better amend the Constitution to require religious tests for federal office!

This, after all, is what Krugman is really gunning for. He may or may not have objections to allowing people with private religious convictions to serve in government. We don’t know the man personally, so we can’t really say. But what he wishes to forbid is the public manifestation of that belief. A Catholic who goes to Mass on Sunday may or may not be tolerable in public office, but what would be absolutely intolerable is a Catholic who takes seriously the injunctions of the Second Vatican Council. After all, *Lumen Gentium* declares that the laity are “called by God . . . [to] contribute to the sanctification of the world.” And again: “All the laity . . . have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine

plan of salvation to all men.” And, with respect to political participation, *Gaudium et Spes* adds: “Christians . . . should be a shining example by their sense of responsibility and dedication to the common good.” It is this sort of Christian, by Krugman’s account, who poses a mortal danger to the Republic.

Amending the Constitution can be tough, however. So we offer a more limited proposal designed to assuage Krugman’s anxieties. Let’s all insist that the candidates in the next presidential election make a solemn promise never to hire anyone to work in their administrations who might conceivably be linked to the Christian Right. Surely, the threat that such “infiltrators” pose to the American Way of Life is every bit as serious as the threat from domestic communists in the depths of the Cold War.

Or maybe not. Maybe the real threat to liberty, tolerance, democracy, and peace in this country comes from people such as Paul Krugman.

—Robert J. Delahunty &
Charles J. Reid, Jr.

STATEMENT OF CONFUSION

“Catholic Members of Congress Express Concern Over Church Sanctions,” the press-release headline blared. Finally, I thought, Catholic politicians are waking up to the increasingly tight legal restrictions being brought to bear on religious groups. After all, California and New York recently passed laws that force Catholic hospitals to provide contraception as part of their health insurance, and Massachusetts drove Catholic Charities from the adoption business. Or perhaps, I hoped, they were advocating for relief of the Church abroad, in China or the Middle East. These days, strong sanctions are being imposed upon the Church and, indirectly, on those to whom She ministers.

I was wrong. It turned out that 18 esteemed Democrats (including, of course, a Kennedy—this time, Patrick of Rhode Island) had issued a publicity-grabbing nonsense “statement” that does nothing other than reiterate what should be obvious: They are not going to let Church teaching stand in the way of their ambition. The members express “concern” that Pope Benedict XVI would take seriously the Church’s views on abortion and that Catholic politicians who express or support pro-choice views were

risking excommunication and should be barred from Communion. While traveling to Brazil, the Pope had said as much—which was nothing more than a restatement of the Church’s teaching.

The statement disingenuously proclaims solidarity with the Church’s teaching on “the undesirability of abortion—we do not celebrate its practice.” And here the rubes out in the pews thought the Church opposed the practice *in toto* as an evil, when all along, She just wanted no parties or banner waving in celebration of this “undesirable” practice. It must be good to be a congressperson, immune from the dictates of logic, catechesis, or common sense.

The statement concludes by saying that the “religious sanction” of excommunication or refusal of Communion “directly conflicts with our fundamental beliefs about the role and responsibility of democratic representatives in a pluralistic America.” These Catholic politicians apparently believe that *vox populi*—at least as expressed in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*—really is the *vox Dei*, and that they are bound to ignore the Church and place their consciences on the shelf as long as they are in public office. Of course, this position makes no sense, as Edmund Burke long ago opined before the electors of Bristol. A representative is not a mere agent of the mass, which cannot, by its nature, be of one mind. While Burke agreed that, in general, a representative ought to put his constituents first, “[y]our representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.” For a “pluralistic” society, by definition, has people of differing views within it; such diversity of opinion does not mandate that a Catholic politician take a stance understood by his Church to be furthering error. The signatories’ stirring defense of their lack of principle also contradicts their earlier invocation of a presumably nonnegotiable commitment to the “dignity of life,” but this, too, has gone unnoticed.

The statement darkly intoned that the Pope’s comment “also clashes with freedoms guaranteed in our Constitution.” These congresspeople must be reading a different Constitution, because the one that actually exists as a governing document places no restrictions on a private institution disciplining its own members on a principle of religious belief. Indeed, some may have been excused for thinking

that allowing churches to exercise their faith in such a manner was at the heart of that quaint “freedom of religion” the First Amendment was designed to protect.

Unfortunately, the Church too quickly backed away from the fight. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was quick to assure everyone that the Pope had been misrepresented and that no one had been excommunicated. While its response did include a sentence asserting the Church’s right to declare Her teachings publicly, it ended with a lukewarm call for politicians to “educate themselves about the teaching of the Church.” Of course, the teaching in question is not especially obscure, and it would take little time to learn it. And at least some of the statement’s signatories were educated at Catholic colleges, so they may have picked up the basics (or at least the telephone number for the theology department) that they could share with their cosigners.

And there is the rub: The members here know exactly what the teaching is and need no further “education” about it. Given these circumstances, the Church should take whatever disciplinary steps She deems necessary, in the interest of charity and pastoral care, in response to this flouting of Her teaching for political gain. Despite what the members of Congress might think, such action does not violate the Constitution—at least, not yet.

—Gerald Russello

OBITER DICTA

Our poet this month is **Eric Sellin**. Dr. Sellin is a retired professor of French and Francophone literatures (Temple and Tulane Universities). He has published numerous critical books and articles and some ten books of poetry in English and French, including, most recently, *Ombres de mon soleil* (2006).

Our cover art is provided by our interior artist, **George McCartney, Jr.** Mr. McCartney studied at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and received a bachelor’s of art from the State University of New York at Geneseo. Since 1997, he has worked in various media in the fields of illustration, graphic design, and textiles. George currently resides in North Carolina with his wife, Kristin, and his son, William.

Our interior art is provided by **Melanie Anderson**. Mrs. Anderson, our designer, received her B.F.A. from Northern Illinois University.

Connoisseur of Chaos



In a spurt of avuncular generosity, I handed the young man a cigar. It was a pretty good smoke, maybe a Romeo y Julieta or a Maria Mancini I had bought for half-price. (I buy all my cigars on sale or do not buy them at all.) The polite young man thanked me, clipped the end with a cigar cutter I dug up somewhere, and, when I held out the match, he began twiddling the cigar around the flame as if he were putting the last golden touches on a marshmallow. About to burn my fingers waiting for the tomfoolery to end, I exclaimed, in the gentle tone I usually reserve for sons and editorial assistants, "What in hell do you think you are doing?"

As a smoker who has sometimes been corralled into the concentration camps known as cigar bars, I had a dim idea of what he was doing, and the young man was kind enough to raise my blood pressure even higher by going into a brief though learned explanation of this toasting ritual. He had smoked perhaps a dozen cigars in his entire life, but he had the technique down pat.

Here, from *CigarTrends.com*, is a full explanation:

To light your cigar, first strike a match and hold it underneath the foot of the cigar to warm the tobacco. The distance should be great enough that the tip of the flame does not touch the underside of the wrapper. Roll the cigar slowly between your fingers to make sure the entire foot is evenly warmed. This will make the tobacco in the cigar more readily accept a flame.

Once you have warmed the tobacco, put the cigar in your mouth at a 45° angle and use another match to light it. Hold the flame directly in front of the cigar (again, so it is not actually touching the wrapper), and slowly inhale to draw the flame to the foot of the cigar. While lighting your cigar, ensure [*sic*] that you turn the barrel so that all sides of the foot are equally lit. You may wish to lightly [*sic*] blow on the foot of the cigar to even things out and make sure your cigar continues to burn evenly.

You may also wish to politely [*sic*] kick the prissy ass down the stairs. At this point, I think I would switch to cigarettes. Better to face cancer than to warm your cigars.

I used to take some care in cutting and lighting my cigars, but the sight of the aficionados at work, many of whom have less taste in cigars than the careful young man, has driven me to biting the end off and snatching a light from a pack of cheap matches or from the kitchen stove. The performance can excite shock and awe. Once in a cigar bar, I was accosted by an importunate smoker in short sleeves who wanted to know what I was about to smoke. I showed him my Macanudo Churchill, and, as I started to bite into it, he practically leapt over my table to offer his cutter, which I not so politely declined. I already have a religion, and tobacco is not my frankincense.

Without ever subscribing to *Cigar Aficionado* or listening to Cigar Dave on the radio, I have been enjoying cigars since I first swiped my old man's cheap Harvesters and smoked them in the woods. I am afraid the average professional cigar smoker I have encountered does not even enjoy smoking, any more than wine snobs, whose greatest pleasure is talking to the wine steward, enjoy drinking wine.

I had a housemate in graduate school who wanted to pass for a cultivated gentleman. He took to reading Alexis Lichine and buying expensive wines. He invited me to dinner, along with a friend who also enjoyed good wine, and asked us to savor one of M. Lichine's top picks. "I say, gentleman," said the connoisseur after swirling a teaspoon or so over his soft palate, "that is something special." When the host left the room, my friend looked at me with a crazed smile. "Corked, isn't it?" we said almost simultaneously.

It used to be that you could take refuge in drinking whiskey. But now you cannot order a drink without hearing a pedantic discourse on single malts or single barrels. Even rum and tequila, to say nothing of gin or vodka, have put on airs and moved uptown. Yes, I have been enjoying single-malt scotches for 40 years and wrote my dissertation on Aeschylus under a known expert on Scotch, who mixed one sherry glass of scotch with one of cool but not cold water. I like the new expensive bourbons (and occasionally mix a martini with Tanqueray), but do not expect to catch me at a Knob Creek tasting. If the only way to avoid amusing chit-chat about alcohol is to drink Jim Beam, then Jim Beam it is. I would have said Evan Williams, but now that the *Wine Spectator* (or some other rash of gumboils) has pronounced it the best value in bourbon, the price has gone up, and with it, the cachet.

I have nothing against the little rituals that grow up naturally around eating and drinking or hunting and fishing. I use barbless hooks in catch-and-release zones, even though I know that a trout caught after a good fight in fast water is not likely to revive when put back. It is just one of the things one does. I almost always take my salad after dinner, put the bread on the tablecloth and not on the plate, and I have learned from French and Italian friends how to sample a good wine without contorting my face into the expression of a mime pretending to choke on a golf ball. But one should not have to take a course or study a website in order to partake of a simple pleasure or practice a sport.

As Chesterton sagely observed, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." Chesterton was obviously not referring to neurosurgery or theology but to skills (such as writing poetry or playing the piano) that might be perfected by a professional but can give pleasure to an amateur. I would go further, however, and say that there are some things that no sane