





# Iraq's religious bazaar at risk

Exotic minority sects that have survived millennia are being crushed by jihadist intolerance, Gerard Russell writes

Iraqi Yazidis light candles to celebrate the new year outside Lalish temple in a valley near Dohuk

Iraq is being denuded of its ancient communities, and both it and the world are the poorer for it. As the jihadists of Islamic State try to entrench their rule, it is an open question whether Iraq's religious minorities will survive, and if so, how they can be protected. There is another, deeper question, however. How did Iraq come to have so much religious diversity in the first place, and what does this say about the type of Islam that prevailed there until the 21st century?

It is a question that struck me back in 2006 when I was head of the British Embassy's political team in Baghdad. I encountered the high priest of the Mandaean monotheists who revere the stars and planets and see themselves as the oldest religion in the world. They and others – Yazidis, Kaka'is and many varieties of Christians – have miraculously survived into the modern era.

Many of them have beliefs that are far from Islamic: figures such as the repentant Peacock Angel, Malak Tawus, whose tears extinguished all seven pits of hell, or the flesh-monster Krun, or the thinly disguised sun-god Sheikh Shams, have a genealogy older than the Koran or the Gospels.

More recently I spent four years researching a book that explains these groups and where they came from. As I did so, I found myself casting sidelong glances at the parallel history of Europe's extinct heresies and religions. These survived much less well. The Cathars, a group who arose in southwest France in the 11th and 12th centuries, had beliefs and practices which resembled in some ways those of the Yazidis – sharing a belief in reincarnation, for example: the Cathars' religion probably had Middle Eastern roots. But the Cathars were crushed by the 20-year Albigensian crusade, waged by the French state; they disappeared from the history books in the early 14th century, while several of their Middle Eastern equivalents have survived over half a millennium longer.

Is that because Christians were intrinsically less tolerant? In some ways, yes: Islam was (and is) more explicit than Christianity in its acceptance that 'the people of the book' – Jews, Christians, and more ambiguously other groups such as the Zoroastrians and Mandaean – deserve to be treated with respect. Indeed, the early Muslims were not especially keen to win converts among non-Arab peoples. Some of them considered Islam as a specifically

Arab faith, and encouraged Christians and Jews only to acknowledge Mohammed as a prophet of the Arabs, not a universal prophet. The Caliph Omar, according to legend, wept when he heard that non-Arabs were adopting Islam.

These early Muslim rulers had other reasons not to press their religion too hard on their subjects. The Arab Muslims who burst out of the Arabian peninsula in the 7th century conquered huge areas of territory in a remarkably short time, and the majority of their subjects during the first few centuries of their rule were not Muslims. The tolerance which Muslims offered was a definite selling-point: a Syriac Christian prayer, perhaps dating to the time of the Muslim conquests, calls on God to 'lead the sons of Ishmael [meaning the Arabs] to us out of the south, to deliver us from the hands of the Romans'. Syriac Christians, practising a different version of the faith from that promulgated in Byzantium, expected more freedom under Muslim rule than under that of their fellow Christians.

After the conquests, the initial goals of the Muslim rulers (or caliphs) were to cement their political control and ensure that their subjects paid taxes; to press their subjects too hard to adopt Islam at this stage would have risked insurrection.

The Muslim Arabs also had a great deal to learn from their subject peoples. They adopted rules of kingship from the defeated Persians, elements of theology and religious law from the Jews, and science from the Christian and other communities which had kept alive the scientific traditions of the Greeks. One group, the Harranians, survived for centuries despite being essentially pagans – because they had so much to offer from their knowledge of Greek geometry and ancient Mesopotamian astrology. Again, the contrast with Europe is instructive: none of the religions which Christianity displaced there had quite the sophistication, self-confidence and prestige of the pre-existing cultures which Islam encountered.

As a result, the Arab-ruled Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates could be strikingly cosmopolitan. Few legends in Christian history can match the example of the early Muslim Caliph Yazid, who was said to sit deep in conversation each night with his chief minister, who later became Saint John of Damascus. Perhaps the story is not true, but it was thought credible enough to repeat; by contrast no early Christian emperor of Rome was said similarly to

## Minority sects

have, say, a rabbi as his closest confidant. For that matter, Yazid's mother was Christian: these intermarriages particularly with Arab Christians were an aspect of early Islamic society which had no parallel in Christianity.

It is easy, though, to over-romanticize. In the end both Islam and Christianity believed in converting others and in the superiority of their own revelation to those of other religions. Early tolerance gave way to systematic encouragement to convert to the state religion, coupled with bouts of persecution instigated by clerical pressure or individual ultra-pious rulers. The Emperor Justinian closed down the school of Plato and drove out its philosophers; the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and forced Christians and Jews to endure humiliating penalties for their faith.

What is more, the Koran gave no sanction to toleration of groups such as the Yazidis, whose beliefs appear to be a thin layer of Islamic practice on top of a theology that owes much to the polytheistic pre-Christian religions of the Middle East. Both some Christians in the Byzantine era, and some Muslims today, have denounced the Yazidis as 'devil-worshippers' based on their reverence for the fallen angel Malak Tawus, who is often identified with Lucifer. So the question still arises: how did they survive? And what has changed?

One reason for the survival of these communities is straightforward. They had mountains, marshes and deserts where they could retreat beyond the reach of all but the most determined governments. When I was in Kurdistan in August, Yazid is told me that some of their co-religionists were still holding out on the Sinjar mountains, in trackless places beyond the reach of the fighters of the Islamic State. Similarly the Kaka'is, another esoteric group which share the Yazidis' belief in reincarnation and reverence for the sun, have survived in the highest mountains of the Zagros range which separates Iraq from Iran.

Europe has mountains too, of course – it was in some of those, in the Pyrenees, that the Cathars held out. But after a certain point, its governments also had armies and military technology that enabled them to take even the most redoubtable mountain strongholds. They had a centralized Church, too, which was able to follow up on the French state's military victories and enforce orthodoxy.

By contrast the Ottoman Empire at-



**Yazidi women take refuge from the violence of Islamic State in the mountains of Sinjar**

tacked the Yazidis several times, allegedly slaughtering three-quarters of the Yazidis of Sinjar in 1832, but could not match the Albigensian Crusade's success: the Yazidi community ultimately survived. Islam's structures are less centralized, and its Sufi orders have often been prepared to accept and absorb non-Islamic ideas in order to win converts. The Ottomans in short were no less ruthless than their medieval European equivalents, but lacked the military strength of the Albigensian crusaders and the bureaucratic thoroughness of the Inquisition.

What really saved the Middle East's minorities, though, was that by the time that government in the Middle East became truly powerful and systematic – which is to say, in the 20th century – it had also changed its priorities. In the 1860s in Egypt, it was possible for the country's ruler, Khedive Ismail, to upbraid one of his ministers for his anti-Christian prejudice by declaring to him that Christians and Muslims 'are all Egyptians alike'. This was a wholly new idea – that people of whatever religion might equally be citizens of the state. It did not mean complete equality – the Khedive, after all, was always Muslim – but it spelt the end of discriminatory legislation and the start of an era of emancipation and progress for non-Muslims across the Middle East.

This great step forward is now being reversed. The desire for a Muslim state has been the goal of the region's Islamist movements since the caliphate was abolished in 1924, after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The redefinition of the peoples of the Middle East along religious instead

of national lines has been the greatest achievement of the Islamists. This appears to have reached its apogee in the form of the 'caliphate' proclaimed by Islamic State in June.

This redefinition is probably more serious for the long-term future of the religious minorities of the region even than the recent events in Iraq, with the expulsion of Christians from Mosul and the massacre of Yazidi men and the enslavement of the women. It creates a sense that non-Muslim groups in the Middle East have no long-term future except emigration or permanent second-class status.

Yazidis and Christians and other minorities have not necessarily been dying in greater numbers than Muslims in Iraq, as a proportion of their overall population. The victims of Islamic State include many Muslims, both Shia, whom they consider apostates, and Sunnis who do not share their views. It has been widely noted by Iraqis that the West failed to react when Muslims were being killed and their shrines were under attack; only after religious minorities were the victims, as they see it, did the United States move into action. In fact the US move had little to do with Yazidis, who still cannot return home to Sinjar and rather more to do with the sudden threat posed by Islamic State to hitherto stable and western-friendly Kurdistan; the criticism is truer, however, when applied to the West's press coverage.

A far greater proportion of those minorities now wants to emigrate, as I found when I visited a Yazidi refugee camp near the Mosul dam in mid-August. The majority of Christians have already left – down from 1.4 million in Iraq's last reliable census in 1987, they now number fewer than 400,000 according to the Chaldean archbishop of Erbil. More than 90 per cent of Mandaeans have left. The availability of asylum for minorities is one reason. Another is the feeling that there is no place for them in a future Iraq: that they are unwanted. 'It's broken,' one of the refugees said to me, as we gasped for breath amid the press of Yazidis anxious to tell their own personal stories of anguish and dispossession. 'It's finished for us here in Iraq.'

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*Gerard Russell is a former British and United Nations diplomat. His book 'Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Among the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East' (Simon & Schuster) is published in November*