

IRAQ. THE WEST AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION - Global Connections newsletter article – June 2003

“The world will never be the same again”. Ever heard that before? Following the recent US and UK-led hostilities we asked four people – a Middle Eastern Christian, a non-western Christian leader, a world mission consultant and a UK theologian – to independently comment on the consequences of the war in Iraq for future world mission. The opinions expressed are the personal opinions of the individuals writing and do not necessarily represent the views of their organisations.

[Middle Eastern Christian Perspective...]* * denotes title added by Global Connections

The war with Iraq represents the last chapter in the long and often bloody history of the relationships between Muslim peoples and western nations. It is too early to assess the impact of this conflict on Christian-Muslim relationships in the long term. This will partly depend on the aftermath of the war, first in Iraq – whether the new regime will be genuinely democratic, independent and competent; and second in Israel/Palestine where Israel continues to enjoy international impunity despite its non-compliance with United Nations Resolutions.

In a sense winning the war in Iraq is much easier than winning the peace, i.e. rebuilding the Iraqi state and fulfilling the promises of justice, freedom and prosperity which have been made to both the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples. This fractured country runs a real risk of civil war between its rival religious and ethnic groups (Sunnis, Shi'is, Kurds, Arabs, etc.).

The immense majority of the Iraqi people, Arabs as well as Kurds, rightfully celebrated the downfall of the old regime. Yet, to the disappointment of many, Arab Iraqis did not welcome the coalition forces as liberators. They suspected the United States and Britain of having their own agendas in this war. The coming months and years will show whether or not these suspicions were founded. As for Arabs and Muslims in general, who did not suffer directly from Saddam's regime, they perceived this war as an Anglo-American aggression against the Iraqi people, hence their support for the Iraqi army. The fact that France was opposed to the war meant that it was not seen as 'the West versus the Muslim World'. But on the other hand, George W. Bush and, to a lesser degree, Tony Blair, have been presented in the media as Christian leaders, not without good reasons. Consequently this conflict will undoubtedly be identified in the mind of many Arabs and Muslims as 'a new crusade'. More than ever before, America will be feared but not loved, Christianity associated with a hostile superpower, and American and British Christians will find it more difficult to live peacefully and work effectively in Muslim countries. The likely rise of Islamic fundamentalism (and possibly terrorism) will carry with it a greater threat for Arab Christians in the Middle East. Many more will seek to emigrate and in doing so the role of the Church as salt and light in the Muslim world will be seriously undermined.

It is so tragic that through his misguided enthusiasm the American President, who seems to be a sincere believer, will have done so much harm to the reputation of his country and more importantly to the name of Christ amongst Muslims. Ironically, his war on terrorism has revealed a trait of personality that he shares with his own enemy, i.e. Osama bin Laden, namely a man whose nationalism and political ambition have colluded with and corrupted his faith in God.

Dr Chawkat Moucarry

[Non-Western Christian Leader perspective...]*

The world heaves a huge sigh of relief that Saddam's regime has fallen, but it fears that new demons will arise in its place. Several of the intractable trouble-spots in today's world- Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Zimbabwe- are the "fall-out" from British colonialism. British evangelicalism was deeply implicated in the imperialist project, with dire consequences for the gospel among sensitive non-Christians both in Britain and the post-colonial world.

Will our children and grandchildren have to live with a similar legacy of US imperialism? Even before the war on Iraq, the US was ripping up the international rule-book and trying to bend the world to suit its military and economic interests. Several international treaties were sabotaged, and international institutions like the UN undermined. This accelerated after 9/11, and many states have been bullied or bribed into joining its 'war against terrorism'.

The double standards practised by US and British governments when it comes to human rights, democracy, free trade, weapons of mass destruction, and so on, have rarely been publicly challenged by Christian leaders, least of all by missionaries and mission agencies that claim to have a global vision. The silence of many American mission leaders in the face of the unilateralism of the US government threatens to undermine the credibility of evangelical mission in the early 21st-century.

The fact that the majority of Christian evangelicals in the US are strongly supportive of the present US administration, and that both Bush and Blair invoke 'god' or deep 'moral convictions' to justify their actions, are broadcast all over the non-Western world's media. So are Zionist American television and radio evangelists. This makes it an even greater incentive for American-based or American-funded evangelical organizations to publicly distance themselves from such ideological abuses of the Christian faith.

Traditional mission training is (rightly) strong on cultural understanding, but (sadly) neglectful of political and economic ideologies. We need to ask whether all that conventional mission training and mission conferences do is to reinforce the worldview of the more conservative Western churches, which is then exported to the rest of the world. Those who have a prophetic witness in their own nation (e.g. Jimmy Carter, Jim Wallis) may be the best ambassadors of the gospel worldwide.

As Christians we need to re-think our basic political allegiances, if we are to recover the gospel's credibility in the public realm.

Vinoth Ramachandra

[Mission Consultant Perspective]*

During April I spent time in the Gulf and Jordan. I would like to share with you three wishes:

I wish we were not controlled by the media!

I was saddened at the ethnocentric view many English believers took of the Iraq War. It just seemed to reflect the diversity of views in the media. Few challenged themselves to think Biblically about the issues and about the people of Iraq and the church in Iraq. If they had wanted to find accurate information about the church in Iraq, how easy would this have been for them? Mission agencies probably know the situation better than most since some of us have worked there for the last 12 years. Sadly we had little or no combined voice out to the churches.

In Jordan churches and believers had the same problem. The media controlled their thoughts and feelings about the War. In their case it was largely Al-Jazeera TV. A totally different view of the war was being presented and believed.

We must learn to discern propaganda! The media must not manipulate us. We need a higher degree of discernment coupled with the ability to deliver a different view. During some of the war I was in Afghanistan with no electricity, no TV and no news. It was good! But opting out is no answer.

I wish we had a better understanding of honour/shame societies.

I was saddened by the culture clash of "The West and the Rest". So few in England understand an honour society, but the majority of societies in the world are like this. In the Muslim World people were shamed by the Baghdad regime. They were doubly shamed by their powerlessness to do anything about it – "He who is guiltless should cast the first stone". There were no 'stones' from Arab/Muslim governments and this increased the sense of shame. Then, shame upon shame, it was arrogant, proud 'Christians' who removed Saddam! It is hard to live with terrible shame. Many wanted the fall of the regime in Baghdad, but they wanted US/UK forces to pay a very high price in blood! This didn't happen! The result was deep anger and frustration. How are Muslims in general and Arabs in particular going to regain their honour?

They need a redeemer! A redeemer avenges dishonour and shame and restores honour. They have a redeemer! But, as westerners, we almost never present the Gospel to them in such a way that it can meet this very deep felt-need.

I wish there was better Co-ordination of Relief and Development Work in Iraq.

I was saddened to see we have learned so little from previous disaster situations when lack of co-ordination among the Christian relief and development groups caused problems. The same problems are evident again. I wish there was a UK (or better – Europe-wide) counterpart of the American co-operation and co-ordination of Christian relief agencies. The result of everyone ‘doing what is right in his own eyes’ is poor relief work! Relief work should be done to the standards of good development work – helping local people to build capacity. Often what happens could better be described as “dumping”.

My hope is that we will see Christian agencies helping to increase the capacity of the churches in Iraq to do holistic ministry in the name of Jesus in the future. We need to pray and discover from God the unique contribution we can make to strengthen the churches in Iraq. It probably won't be to have a western presence on the ground year-round! We need to be careful that we are not donor-driven into projects that are not God's plan for us as we seek to stand alongside our Iraqi brothers and sisters.

Three wishes: Praise God that we worship the One, “Who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power at work within us”.

Howard Norrish

[UK Theologian's perspective..]*

War, Hypocrisy, and Sin

You might have heard the one about heckler who dismissed the evangelist by shouting that the Church was full of hypocrites. "Why not join us", came the reply, "There's always room for one more!"

Those who opposed the war in Iraq seemed most often to do so on the grounds that it was waged hypocritically. The Coalition governments, they alleged, had no right to remove Saddam Hussein's regime because they had once backed it with arms against Iran. Saddam may have had weapons of mass destruction, but we had them, too. The West had oil interests in the region, so its motives couldn't be trusted. All this, ran the argument, made Bush, Blair and their followers hypocrites, and such hypocrisy voided any claim they might make to the war's being just.

Now plainly, Jesus abhorred hypocrisy. His famous diatribe in Matthew 23 is just one of several attacks on the pretences and double-standards of the Scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mk. 12:13-15; Lk. 12:1-3; Mt. 6:1-8) Yet he never saw disclosure of hypocrisy as a moral end in itself. He never implied that it should automatically negate the values which the hypocrites might have espoused. Indeed, he urged his disciples to *follow* what the Pharisees had taught them (Mt. 23:3). The point is that we may need to carry through the very same precepts advocated by those we have deemed hypocrites - only more consistently, more dynamically and more effectively. For all its good intentions, this is where the anti-war movement faltered. Time and again, the cry of hypocrisy was used to foreclose debate, rather than advance it. When asked what they might themselves do about the menace of Saddam, opponents of the war often behaved as if merely exposing coalition hypocrisy absolved them from tabling workable non-military options. After a while, such apparent high-mindedness began to look like a cover for ethical passivity - for a dearth of realistic alternatives, and, effectively, for a willingness to let Saddam continue his monstrous tyranny.

Martin Luther famously observed that Christians are at once both justified and sinful. Despite their own faith in Christ, George Bush and Tony Blair may well have displayed hypocrisy over Iraq. But as the preacher said, they would not be the only ones. Indeed, now that the war is over and the peace must be won, Jesus' challenge not merely to revile the leaven of hypocrisy, but the *surpass* the righteousness of its perpetrators, should remind those who opposed the conflict that pious rhetoric alone will not do.

Rev Dr David Hilborn