

CENTRE OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY  
Dept. for the Study of Religion  
SOAS

***CHRISTIANS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ TODAY: FACING THE CHALLENGES***  
***Workshop Report***

The *Centre of World Christianity*, Dept for the Study of Religions, SOAS hosted on Monday 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2014 a Workshop, 'Christians in Syria and Iraq today: facing the challenges' to explore the realities of the Christian communities in Syria and Iraq. Six speakers presented a rich spread of papers, chaired by Dr. Erica C. D. Hunter.

Dr. Hratch Tchilingirian (University of Oxford) '***The Armenian Perspective***' focused on the two main problems affecting the communities today: Security and Migration. Discussing security, Dr. Tchilingirian noted that whilst everyone in Iraq and Syria is subject to violence, the Christians in particular were very vulnerable because of their small numbers, relatively speaking. In Syria, Christians were perceived as being pro-régime, a viewpoint that is often maintained in the West. The difficulty for the Christians (as with other non-Muslim groups) is that, for existentialist reasons, they were obliged to be pro-régime. The Armenians, like all other Christian groups, have been torn between Syrian and Western perspectives. The emptying of the Middle East has also had serious implications not only intellectually, but also economically: the vicissitudes in Iraq and Syria has had a dramatic effect on industry, repeating the situation that arose during the civil war in the Lebanon where business reinvested outside of the Middle East. They would be extremely reluctant to return and re-establish themselves due to the extreme uncertainty and lack of stability. Long-term, with the continuing growth of diaspora communities in the West, the balance of population was no longer in the Middle East, increasingly being only a 'presence by name'. Emigration to the West, over and above other countries in the Middle East was preferred, because of the stability and security, although some Armenians had gone to Armenia. Armenia has relaxed its immigration rules to offer returning Armenians passports and citizenship, which could be readily obtained in Syria or Lebanon.

Mar Polycarpus (Metropolitan and Arch Vicar of the Netherlands, Syrian Orthodox Church) '***Syrian Orthodox Perspectives on Syria and Iraq***' spoke how Christianity was deeply rooted in the Middle East from the first centuries AD. In the twentieth century, many of the architects who shaped modern political thought were Christian, the most notable being Michel Aflak. Christians were instrumental in the development of pluralistic societies. Today Christians face enormous pressures whether 'to go or to stay', the please of leading clerics often conflicting vis-à-vis their own desire to emigrate. One of the inherent difficulties for Christians is that a 'neutral' i.e. non-aligned stance is not acceptable to Islamic fundamentalists, this being interpreted that if one did not support 'their side', one must be working with 'the other side'. Other immediate problems surround the location of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate that is currently in Damascus. The last synod, which was held in conjunction with the election of the incoming Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II following the death of Ignatius Zakka I Iwas (1980-2014), decided to keep the patriarchate in Damascus since Syria had an intrinsic connection with Christianity and also to bolster the Christian communities there, especially as many Christians wish to leave. In Turkey, the improved security had led to some positive developments. Two monasteries on Mt. Izla in the Tur Abdin have recently been dedicated to Mar Augin and Mar Yacob. Emigres from Tur Abdin return from Europe for summer vacations. The diaspora has a real sense of 'the homeland', but issues of

stability and security preclude serious thoughts about permanent resettlement. Dr. Naures Atto (University of Cambridge) “**Diaspora and Crisis Studies**” explored how modern Assyrians in Europe related to questions of ‘the homeland’ (**arta**) using modern media. Facebook and ‘rap’ music uphold the ancient traditions of the Assyrians. She played recordings of a Syrian Orthodox rap group in Germany singing about 2000 years of oppression and the *Seyfo*. In contrast to the 1<sup>st</sup> generation who arrived from the Tur Abdin in the mid-1960’s and 1970’s who remembered ‘the homeland’ primarily through nostalgic songs, youth want change and use ‘rap music’ to ask questions of identity such as, ‘Where is my country?’, ‘where is my people?’. Uppermost in the minds of Syrian Orthodox youth is the need for some sense of geographical identity. The Syrian Orthodox communities in Europe at present see themselves as ‘hostages in the homeland, orphans in the diaspora’. There have also been changes in social attitudes particularly amongst the youth (many of whom have been born in the diaspora), with individual rights waxing at the expense of the collective identities that were the hallmark of the communities in the ‘homeland’. Awareness of ‘what is the homeland’ is developed and maintained amongst the youth through various channels, including rap music. Rather than a geographical location, ‘the homeland’ is increasingly being defined as ‘where the culture is based’. The traditional roots are still remembered and concern is expressed about the communities in Syria. Any move to return the patriarchal base from Damascus to Turkey was vetoed. Facebook is used to disseminate information about the situation in the Middle East, whilst money from fund-raising concerts and parties is sent to Syria to help the communities. However, the future of ‘the homeland’ will be in the diaspora, with a symbolic presence in the Middle East, primarily since people do not trust the situation to be stable and secure.

Father Dr. Behnam Sony (St. Ephrem’s Seminary, Karakoche, Iraq) “**Living in Karakoche**” outlined the history of this town, otherwise known as Bagdede. He stressed that its long history of Christianity (with origins as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century), the town may be likened to the serpent that renews itself i.e. sheds an old skin, replacing it with a new skin. Hence Karakoche has managed to survive through various vicissitudes down the centuries. Today the town is a major centre of Christianity in northern Iraq, with a predominantly Syrian Catholic population. There is also a small number of Moslems also resident, who were settled in the town by Saddam Hussein during the purges of the late 1980’s. Today in Karakoche, the schools are open and available to all – irrespective of religious denomination. Although Muslims cannot buy land in Karakoche (in keeping with the fact that Arab Muslims cannot buy land in Kurdistan region), the town might be seen as a model of the co-existence of Christians and Moslems. As well as the Christians, the Moslems also feel safe. Today there are 9 operating churches in Qaraqosh and it has a rich literary history, with many manuscripts having been sold to international institutions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There has been recently a concerted effort to develop agriculture (melon crops) and cultivate fertile land. However, the problem of migration still is a major issue and Father Behnam ended with personal plea that Christians should not emigrate from this ancient bastion of Christianity.

Dr. Suha Rassam (Iraqi Christians in Need) “*ICIN’s work in Syria and Iraq*” gave a detailed presentation about the charity’s work in Syria and Iraq. With the situation worsening after 2003 in Iraq, Christians left due to the spate of kidnappings, murders, with the ethnic cleansing of Dora in 2006, imposition of the jizya tax in Mosul, in 2008 and the massacre at Our Lady of Salvation in 2010 being real low points. Such is the drain of population that Patriarch Louis Sako is very worried about the future of Christianity in Iraq. In 2013 he had 213 children taking 1<sup>st</sup> Communion. In 2014, the number had

plummeted to 15. Many of the Christians left for Syria, where they have been caught up in the turmoils that have beset that country. ICIN, as its name suggests, focuses on Iraq Christians, but in Syria also helps refugees from Iraq and also couples where only one of the spouses is Iraqi. Excepting bank charges, the charity has no expenses, since various voluntary committees work with local clergy and co-ordinates with the bishops who will then pass on funds to co-ordinators 'on the ground'. Over and above financial donations to refugees, ICIN is also involved in various activities to devise programmes where people can develop their skills. These include English language courses that have been very successful, programmes to learn the computer were also conducted between 2009-2011 (\$1000 per month allocation). Educational projects help students - \$40.00 pcm at primary level, \$80.00 pcm at secondary level and \$160 pcm at tertiary level. A total of 32 students have been helped. With a high proportion of refugees in Syria being women, widows are also given help. This has expanded from an initial 10 widows to 39 who receive \$US100 per month for 1-2 persons and up to \$US 300 for 4 or more persons. For many women, this money is their only means of support and is a vital lifeline. Children are also sponsored to go on summer camps and there is a Christmas party. Whilst ICIN has raised over 8 years, more than \$1 million, this is just a drop in the ocean to meet the needs of displaced and dispossessed Iraqi Christians. The charity is non-denominational, but as Dr. Tchilingirian pointed out in discussion, the different churches have not developed a common, co-ordinated approach and as a charitable efforts tend to be piecemeal.

Dr. Anthony O'Mahony (Heythrop College) "***Christianity in Syria: Modern History and Contemporary Context***" drew attention to the fact that the situation re Christians in Syria was part of a global crisis with a real problem being the global mentality. The Middle Eastern origins of Christianity are almost invisible, with 99% of Christians being outside the Middle East. Only 12% Christians are 'eastern', 88% are 'western', whereas in the 11<sup>th</sup> century when 50% of the population in the Middle East was Christian. In post-Ottoman society there has been a real decline in Christian-Muslim relations: Turkey, north Cyprus, Bosnia, Iraq and Syria. Syria now poses an existential crisis and the future for Christians is most uncertain. The Syrian government still controls about 70% of the country and the state still works on many levels, but the civil crisis has changed people's views on issues and instigated a survival mode. In the rebel held areas the situation of the Christians is very endangered with real threats to their human rights. In Raqqa they were obliged by the Islamic fundamentalists (many of whom are not native to Syria) to acknowledge their *dhimmi* status. Christians were very disappointed that the recent peace talks in Geneva failed and are apprehensive about the forthcoming presidential elections in Syria during May. However, the pluralism that is characteristic of Syria (Ismailis, Druze, Alawites) etc. is a vital characteristic that is something to be vigorously upheld. As well as change 'on the ground' in Syria, within the various 'eastern' churches there have also been major changes in leadership, including newly or recently appointed patriarchs for the Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox [following the deaths of Ignatius Zakka Iwas, and Shenouda III] also Maronites and Chaldeans. This may lead to new 'avenues of change'. Although the West has failed Syria diplomatically and is more into a 'war scenario', hopefully a new scenario will emerge with the possibility that Christians may remain in Syria – despite the fact that many think that there is no future for them.

Dr Erica Hunter  
Senior Lecturer in Eastern Christianity  
Department of the Study of Religions  
SOAS, University of London