

A crescent or a scimitar, cross or ...?

Islamic militancy has hit the headlines in a terrifying way. It is difficult to comprehend the suffering that those caught up in acts of violence must have endured. Of particular concern must be the ancient Christian churches in the Middle East whose adherents are being terrorised, forced out of their homes and in many cases their countries.

Canon Andrew White vicar of St George's Church in Bagdad is an Anglican priest on the front line. He is sometimes affectionately called "the Vicar of Bagdad". In his time he has seen the murder of members of his congregation and a dwindling Christian presence in Iraq, parts of which are now under the control of Islamic State the latest and most terrifying of Islamic manifestations of fundamentalism. His position seems to be that the Iraq war of 2003 was worth it (just) but however we look at it things are hardly any better since that war and may be in the opinion of many considerably worse.

The long and sorry saga of Western intervention in the Middle East from the nineteenth century, through the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Second World War to the Iraq War of 2003 have left a unenviable legacy. Driven variously by imperialism and the seductive quest for oil the Middle East has had inflicted upon it a recipe for destabilisation.

Arguably, if Western Christian leaders had had a more informed understanding of Islam, its theology, history and above all its internal divisions, events might have taken a less destructive turn. The question must now be is it too late to address the situation?

Good theology underpinned by Christian practice would surely suggest that hope for a better future based on a more informed understanding should not be allowed to vanish. An urgent priority must nevertheless be an awakening by the Christian world to the desperate situation of their fellow believers in the lands where Christianity first took root.

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