

Thought for the week for the Henley Standard 3/3/10
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The Lost History of Christianity.

If you dig under a good number of village mosques in northern Iraq, there is a good chance you will find the foundations of a Christian church.

Before Canterbury had its first Archbishop, there was a Christian archbishop based at Herat. Herat, you will recall, is in Afghanistan.

About AD 780, the bishop Timothy became the patriarch (leader) of the Church of the East, which was then based at the ancient city of Seleucia. While Europe was languishing in the "Dark Ages", Timothy's churches, which spoke and wrote in Syriac, preserved a tradition stretching back to the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, and reached along the Silk Road eastwards deep into China. In England, by comparison, at that time there were just two "metropolitans" (think: archbishop) - that of York and Canterbury. Timothy himself presided over nineteen, from Jerusalem, across Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and as far east as Khanbalik (which we now call Beijing).

Timothy's ancient seat, Seleucia, became the city of Ctesiphon, until it was eclipsed by the new capital of the region, and in AD 800 Archbishop Timothy moved his seat there. The name of his new seat? Baghdad. From there Timothy presided over perhaps a quarter of the world's Christians. Well into the middle ages many Iraqi cities well known to us from the media (such as Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk and Tikrit) were thriving Christian centres, from well before until many centuries after the coming of Islam.

The cities of Nisibis and Jundishapur were legendary centres of learning, that kept alive the culture and the science of the ancient world, both of the Greeks, the Romans, and the Persians. In their scholarship and access to classical learning, the Eastern Churches in AD 800 were at a level that Latin Europe would not reach until at least the 1200's.

Here in the West, we tend to view the history of our faith as a progression westwards from Jerusalem to Rome, from Rome to Canterbury, and so on. We have forgotten that in ancient times the roads from Jerusalem ran East as well as West, indeed travel round the "fertile Crescent" was actually the more obvious way for missionaries to go with the story of Jesus.

In our history of the faith, our common mental maps omit a thousand years of that story, and several million square miles of territory. We have forgotten a world.

What happened? The short answer is that the church of the east was exterminated. The Arab conquests in the 7th century did not at first pose a threat to the Christians in the region, and in many places Christians and Muslims co-existed peacefully together. However Muslim regimes (like the Romans in the West) did embark on waves of persecution, which once the churches became a minority were more and more ferocious, culminating in the 1400's when the eastern church from Jerusalem westwards was savaged. The invading Mongol hordes from the north east then finished off what the Muslims began, with the result that a whole culture was almost extinguished. Pockets of Christian faith remained, however, until the 20th century, when fresh waves of persecution (for example the genocide that Turkey inflicted upon the Armenian Christians in 1915, and which still awaits an apology) administered the coup de grace.

It is ironic that under Sadaam Hussein, Iraq's tiny Christian church enjoyed a small measure of protection. Now, Muslim extremists in Iraq are using their new found freedoms to bomb churches and kidnap and murder the handful of faithful Christians who have not fled the country in the wake of the US led invasion. These are the last remnants of Bishop Timothy's Syriac church, ghosts from a noble heritage that we are in danger of losing forever.