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Religion Report

Christian Minorities in the Islamic Middle East : Rosie Malek- 30 May 2007 Yonan on the Assyrians

The Assyrian Christian population of the Middle East - Antiochian, Catholic and Orthodox - is now a fraction of what it once was, and the story of the genocide practised upon them remains largely untold.

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Transcript

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Stephen Crittenden: Welcome to The Religion Report.

EASTERN MUSIC

Stephen Crittenden: The plight of Christian minorities in the Islamic Middle East is one of the 20th century tragedies to which we pay least attention.

From the Copts in Egypt, to the Maronites, the Melkites in Lebanon, Orthodox and Chaldeans, the Christian population of the Middle East is a fraction of what it was, and more vulnerable than ever. Nowhere is the situation worse at the moment than in Iraq. And few groups are more vulnerable than the ancient Assyrian

Christian community. In fact, this week the Italian journalist Sandro Magister, has warned of the end of Christianity in Iraq.

In early May in a heavily Christian suburb of Baghdad, a Sunni extremist group began broadcasting a fatwah over the loudspeakers of the neighbourhood mosque: the Assyrian Christian community had to convert to Islam or leave, or die. Their Muslim neighbours were to seize their property. The men were told they had to pay the gizya - the protection money Jews and Christians traditionally had to pay to their Muslim overlords - and families were told they could only stay if they married one of their daughters to a Muslim.

More than 300 Assyrian families have fled, mostly to the north into the Kurdish region of Iraq where they are not welcome either. They are sleeping in cemeteries, they have no food, more than 30 of their churches have been bombed, their children are being kidnapped and murdered.

Rosie Malek-Yonan is an Assyrian-American. She is a successful film and television actor who has appeared in many popular shows including Dynasty, Seinfeld, E.R. and Chicago Hope. Her novel, The Crimson Field, is a fictionalised account of the little-known Assyrian genocide that took place at the hands of the Ottoman Turks during World War One at the same time that the better-known Armenian genocide was taking place. She recently directed a documentary film on the same subject. And last year she was invited to give testimony before the US Congress about the plight of Assyrian Christians in Iraq. Rosie Malek-Yonan spoke to me from her home in California.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: The Assyrian people are the indigenous people actually of Mesopotamia, before it even was Iraq. All of that area was Mesopotamia and is the original homeland of the Assyrians. They date back to over 6,000 years and were always concentrated in that region.

Stephen Crittenden: And Christianity was accepted by Assyrians, well virtually in apostolic times, right at the very, very beginning?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Right. Assyrians were actually the first nation to accept Christianity as an entire nation, not just individuals, but the entire nation, and we built the first church of the east.

Stephen Crittenden: And what about language? Aramaic for church, but what language does a typical Assyrian family in Baghdad speak at home?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Well the language that we typically speak is the modern Assyrian, which comes from the ancient Aramian, which is the language of Christ. The church liturgy still uses the ancient language, and we grew up learning it, and understanding it and knowing it, but it's not typically used at home. At home we generally will speak the more modern Assyrian dialect.

Stephen Crittenden: Now in early May, a fatwah was issued by a militant Sunni group in Baghdad, calling on the Christians in a particular suburb of Baghdad called Dora, to convert to Islam or die.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Yes. Actually as we are speaking, I'm getting bombarded with emails, and one of them is a plea to help the Assyrians of Iraq. The women in particular - I'll just read you a little bit of this email - says the Virgin Mary put on a hijab (hijab is the covering) so why not all Christian women dress the same? They are asking all women to dress in that fashion.

Stephen Crittenden: I understand there's a lot of kidnapping and murdering of particularly of young kids?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Absolutely. Our children are being murdered, they're being kidnapped for ransom, even when the ransom is paid they're still killed. Priests are being beheaded, nuns are being killed, and not just a beheading, they behead them, they cut also arms and legs, they hack them off and they return them in that manner. Little children, their heads are bashed with concrete blocks. This has been going on since the beginning of the Iraq War. This is isn't just an isolated incident here or there, this is an ongoing genocide.

Stephen Crittenden: I understand that there were 1.4-million Christians in Iraq before the American invasion, in 2003, and that many left at that time, and went particularly to Syria. How many are left?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: In Iraq there's probably between 600,000 and 800,000 left. The majority of the refugees that are now stranded in Syria and Jordan 40% of them are Christian Assyrians. They are not protected, they have nowhere to go, they have no shelter, they have no food, they're living in the streets in poverty.

Stephen Crittenden: And 300 families just in the last month, have been driven out of Baghdad.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Yes. They don't know where to go. Right now they are taking refuge in churches, they take refuge in wherever they can.

Stephen Crittenden: How were the Assyrian Christians treated under Saddam Hussein?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: The situation is terribly worse now. It was much better for them then. They thought it was bad then. All the things that the Kurds had been complaining about during Saddam's regime now they are doing those things to the Assyrians, because the goal is to drive Assyrians out of the northern region so that the Kurds can take over that entire region.

Stephen Crittenden: Indeed, in your testimony before Congress last year, you talked about the fact that Assyrians also have a problem with the Kurds, almost as though the Assyrians in Iraq are even lower on the pecking order than the Kurds.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Oh, absolutely. But now the Kurds have become powerful because the US is assisting them. So if they get assistance and Assyrians don't, the result is that they're going to bully the Assyrians out of there. They want them out of that area, they want to take the entire area and a so-called Kurdistan region and make it a Kurdistan region. Minus the Assyrians.

Stephen Crittenden: What are the American troops in Baghdad doing about these developments of the last month or so?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: They're doing absolutely nothing. If they were doing something, we would see something, we would see just a glimmer of hope, but there's nothing there. I mean there's reports of them saying 'We're not here to save you, we're not here to help you.'

Stephen Crittenden: Rosie, there are reports that the persecution of Christians in Baghdad at the moment is being directed by the imams in the mosques, that the loudspeakers in the mosques are telling Muslims to seize the property of their Christian neighbours and carry out their fatwah, that it's not just criminal elements, it's being directed from the mosques.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Oh, of course. I mean look, any time we go to war with the Middle East, it is going to become a religious war. The Assyrians wear the face of Christianity, we are the first that are going to get hit. Our properties get seized, our homes are taken, and our lives are taken. That goes without a doubt, and of course it's the religious leaders that are doing this. It comes from them, and it also on the other hand, comes from the Kurds. We are getting it from every side, it's not just one element, and we're isolated, with absolutely no assistance. And the thing is, since 2003 when Assyrians started getting hit, we have never retaliated. We have never hit back; we have never fired back. They burnt more than 30 churches in Iraq. Not once has an Assyrian gone to burn a mosque in retaliation.

Stephen Crittenden: Rosie, you've devoted a lot of time, you've written a novel, and last year you made a documentary film to draw public awareness to the Assyrian genocide that took place at the same time that the much better known Armenian genocide was taking place, both at the hands of the Ottoman Turks during World War I. Tell us about the Assyrian genocide.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: The Assyrian genocide started in 1914 with the onset of World War I. It began in the hands of the Ottoman Turks, with the help of the Kurds and Persia at that time, or Iran as we know it now. The Assyrians that were being massacred were in South East Turkey (Hakkari), and also in the Urmia Region, which is north-western Iran. And this went on for nearly four years, till the end of World War I. But I believe more than that, there has been an ongoing, slow genocide that the Assyrian people have been caught up in. And actually even before the 1914 World War I Assyrian genocide, it began in 1895 in Diyarbekir where

about 55,000 Assyrians were killed and about another 100,000 were forcibly Islamicised.

Stephen Crittenden: This is in Turkey?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Yes, and this really paved the way for the Assyrian genocide in the shadows of World War I, with two-thirds of the Assyrian population totalling 750,000 were annihilated by the Ottoman Turks, Kurds, and Persians. And their crime was only being Christian, but it didn't stop there. Again, 1933 in Iraq, the Semele Massacre, we saw 3,000 Assyrian men, women, children unarmed, massacred by the Iraqi Army, and Kurdish warlords, and again, the Iranian Revolution, we saw what that did to the Assyrian population in Iran.

Stephen Crittenden: Just repeat for us Rosie, what is the estimate of the number of Assyrians who died in the 1914-1918 genocide?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: 1914-1918, 750,000 Assyrians. That's two-thirds of our population. Two out of three Assyrians died.

Stephen Crittenden: Well many Assyrians have left. There's a big Assyrian diaspora; where are they to be found in the largest numbers around the world?

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Around the world there is a very large number in Chicago; nearly 100,000 Assyrians in Chicago. And when I use the term 'Assyrian', I'm not differentiating the different religious denominations, whether they're Catholic, Calvinists, or Protestants or Church of the East, I'm using the term as a general term for all Assyrians. So we have a big population in Chicago, in Detroit, in San Diego, in Sweden, Södertälje, Sweden, we have a huge, huge community of Assyrians. A lot of the refugees from Iraq are finding their way to Sweden. So we're pretty much spread all over the world.

The one thing I want to touch upon is when we don't address a genocide, or a massacre of a nation, it will keep on happening. When in World War I the Assyrian genocide was not addressed, and to this day there are people that don't know about it, that just set the precedent for the same thing to happen again. World War II, Jewish Holocaust. Hitler was the one who said 'Who remembers the Armenians?' By then Assyrians weren't even in the picture any more, because we don't deal with these issues, we just let them happen, we turn a blind eye. The bottom line is that the Assyrians in Iraq, they have to be protected, just like the Kurds were protected back in 1991. They were given a safe zone. We need an Assyrian safe zone. This has to be done, and it could only be done if the US decides to help them to do this, and the UN steps in.

Stephen Crittenden: Thank you very much for being on the program.

Rosie Malek-Yonan: Thank you.

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Guests

Rosie Malek-Yonan

Assyrian-American film and TV actor, novelist and Assyrian activist

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[Islamic group in Baghdad: "Get rid of the cross or we will burn your Churches".](#)

[Assyrian independence on wiki](#)

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