

Address by The Rt Rev Bashar Warda, Archbishop of Erbil,
at Civitas, 20 May 2019.

Thank you David Green, and thank you Civitas, for organising this discussion.

I came to London to meet leaders of your government, and leaders of civil and religious organisations from whom, of course, I ask for help: help to rebuild my shattered country. Being here has also given me the chance to speak to the the world through the BBC.

But I have come as well to discuss the role Christian communities play, or have played, in Islamic societies. This role has been overlooked. It is an important part of the formation of civil society in most of the world. It needs highlighting because the situation in Iraq has been woefully misread by western decision makers. There is no reason to believe they will not misread the same signs and portents in their own countries. You think you are a long way from the chaos of Iraq? Let me assure you; it is only six hours away.

Understanding what has happened in Iraq means being truthful about the nature and purpose of Christian civil order. It means being truthful about the nature and purpose of the laws of Islam. It means being truthful about what happens when these two come together in one place. I appreciate that this is an uncomfortable subject to discuss in the comfort of a peaceful country. But for Iraqi Christians this is no abstract matter.

Christianity in Iraq, one of the oldest Churches, if not the oldest Church in the world, is perilously close to extinction. In the years before 2003, we numbered as many as one-and-a-half million: six percent of Iraq's population. Today, there are perhaps as few as 250,000 of us left. Maybe less.

When a people have nothing left to lose, in some sense it is very liberating, and from this position of clarity and new-found courage I will speak honestly on behalf of my people and tell you the truth. Those of us who remain must be ready to face martyrdom.

A people who have endured persecution in patience and faith for 1,400 years confront an existential struggle, our final struggle in Iraq. The most immediate cause is the ISIS attack that led to the displacement of more than 125,000 Christians from historical homelands and rendered us, in a single night, without shelter and refuge, without work or properties, without churches and monasteries, without the ability to participate in any of the normal things of life that give dignity; family visits, celebration of weddings and births, sharing of sorrows. Our tormentors confiscated our present while seeking to wipe out our history and destroy our future.

This was an exceptional situation, but not an isolated one. It was part of the recurring cycle of violence in the Middle East over 1,400 years. With each successive cycle the number of Christians falls away, till today we are at the the point of extinction. Argue as you will, but extinction is coming, and what then will anyone say? That we were made extinct by natural disaster, or gentle migration? That the ISIS attacks were unexpected, and we were taken by surprise? –That is what the media will say. Or will the truth emerge after our disappearance: that we were persistently and steadily eliminated over the course of 1,400 years by a belief system which allowed for regular and recurring cycles of violence against us – like the Ottoman genocide of 1916-1922.

There are still extremist groups, growing in number, asserting that killing Christians and Yazidis helps spread Islam. By strictly adhering to Koranic teaching the prescribe *Dhimmi* status (second class citizenship) to minorities, allowing confiscation of property and enforcement of *jizya* Islamic tax.

And when we are gone, our persecutors will turn against each other, as they do. Nothing will be left but fear and hatred.

Why is this? Why does one way of life tend towards an educated and stable society, a society to which the poor and persecuted are drawn, while another way of life tends toward theft and bloodshed, from which even the most useful members try to flee? This is a question for an Institute for the Study of Civil Society!

Things were not always so bad. Apologists for 1,400 years of Christian oppression point to periods of Muslim tolerance as a possible and desired alternative to violence and persecution. One cannot deny the existence of times of relative tolerance. Under al Rashid, the House of Wisdom, the great library, was founded in Baghdad. There was a time of relative prosperity while Christian and Jewish scholarship was valued, and a flowering of science, mathematics and Medicine was made possible by Nestorian Christian scholars who translated Greek texts, already ancient in the ninth century. Our Christian ancestors shared with Muslim Arabs a deep tradition of thought and philosophy and engaged with them in respectful dialogue from the 8th century. The Arab Golden Age, as historian Philip Jenkins has noted, was built on Chaldean and Syriac scholarship. *Christian* scholarship. The imposition of Shari'a law saw the decline of great learning, and the end of the "Golden Age" of Arab culture. A style of scholastic dialogue had developed, and which could only occur, because a succession of caliphs tolerated minorities. As toleration ended, so did the culture and wealth which flowed from it.

These moments of toleration have been a one-way experience: Islamic rulers decide, according to their own judgment and whim, whether Christians and other non-Muslims are to be tolerated and to what degree. It is not, and has never, ever, been a question of equality. Fundamentally, in the eyes of Islam, Christians are not equal. We are not to be treated as equal; we are only to be tolerated or not tolerated, depending upon the intensity of the prevailing Jihadi spirit. Yes; the root of all of this is the teachings of Jihad, the justification for acts of violence.

If you were a Christian in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East, you would never accept for one moment the shadow under which we Iraqis live – and under which we have lived for centuries. By my country's constitution we are lesser citizens, we live at the discretion of our self-appointed superiors. Our humanity gives us no rights. Here in Britain you stand equal under the law, under Magna Carta. This basic principle of British and American life is a foundation of Christian civic order, in which we are all children under a loving God, created in His image and likeness, which gives us all dignity, and urges on us mutual respect.

Civic security grows out of a worldview that values every individual human not for their position or role, but simply because they are human. This view has been the great gift of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a fundamental reason why the Church has always supported learning, medicine and humanitarian work. Without a Christian presence and influence in Iraq, without some refuge to turn to for simple acknowledgment of a person's inherent humanity, one cannot see how the country could ever become an attractive place to live for any of its peoples. Its citizens will continue to flee — not only the good and useful people, but also those with evil intent. And, incidentally, they will flee to countries where the Judeo-Christian ethic still shapes national culture for the time being.

Rebuilding civil society means rebuilding it for everybody. Everyone has a place, and everyone has a chance to thrive. In Iraq there is no redress for those who have lost properties, homes and businesses. Tens of thousands of Christians have nothing to show for their life's work, for generations of work, in places where their families have lived, maybe, for thousands of years. No redress. And even if there was some sort of restitution, why should they not just get up and leave before it all happens again?

This claim of automatic superiority by one group over another is antithetical to harmonious civic life. It obviously undermines the oppressed, but it doesn't help the oppressors.

The truth is, there is a foundational crisis within Islam itself, and if this crisis is not acknowledged, addressed and fixed then there can be no future for civil society in the Middle East, or indeed anywhere where Islam brings itself to bare upon a host nation.

Allow me to quote an authority on this:

“ Within the classical tradition, the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is assumed to be one of segregation and enmity. Perhaps there were reasons for this during the Middle Ages, when the tenets of Islamic orthodoxy were established, but in today's world such a doctrine is unreasonable. To the extent that Muslims adhere to this view of Islam, it renders them incapable of living harmoniously and peacefully within the multi-cultural, multi-religious societies of the 21st century.”

Those words come not from some right wing political figure in the West, but from the leader of the largest Muslim organisation in the world – Indonesian Islamic leader Yahya Cholil Staqf.

These sentiments may be more fully developed among Muslims in Asia than in the Middle East but, post-ISIS, we begin to hear similar things from Muslims in Iraq. Clearly, ISIS shocked the conscience of the world, and has shocked the conscience of the Islamic-majority world as well. The question now is whether or not Islam will continue on a political trajectory, in which Shari'a is the basis for civil law and nearly every aspect of life is circumscribed by religion, or whether a more civil, tolerant movement will develop.

The defeat of Daesh has not seen the defeat of the idea of the re-establishment of the Caliphate. This has re-awoken and is now firmly implanted in minds throughout the Muslim world. And with this idea of the Caliphate there comes all the formal historical structures of intentional inequality and discrimination against non-Muslims.

I speak here not only of Iraq. We see leaders in other countries in the Middle East who are clearly acting in a way consistent with the re-establishment of the Caliphate.

How will you in the West react to this? My question to you is not rhetorical. The religious minorities of the Middle East want to know the answer. Will you continue to condone this never-ending, organised persecution against us? When the next wave of violence begins to hit us, will anyone on your campuses hold demonstrations and carry signs that say, "we are all Christians"?

And yes I do say, the "next wave of violence", for this is simply the natural result of a ruling system that preaches inequality, and justifies persecution. The equation is not complicated. One group is taught that they are superior and legally entitled to treat others as inferior human beings on the sole basis of their faith and religious practices. This teaching inevitably leads to violence against any "inferiors" who refuse to change their faith. And there you have it – the history of Christians in the Middle East for the last 1,400 years.

In considering this I hope that the Catholic Church's experience may be of some use to Muslims grappling with these issues. After all, just a century and a half ago, we had Papal States, and a much more politically-oriented Christianity in places. But we developed away from that, getting back to the roots of the faith, before Constantine, and embracing again Christ's words "My kingdom is not of this world."

How are we to build a better future?

This change must come about as the conscious work of the Muslim world itself. We see the small beginnings, perhaps, of this recognition in Egypt, in Jordan, in Asia, even in Saudi Arabia. Certainly much remains to be seen as to whether there is actual sincerity in this. Those of you who live in societies which grew out of Christian tradition should not remain passive and simply hope for the best. In London I have

had the chance to talk about practical steps for diplomats and government agencies to take. But the heart of the struggle for all people is to understand the nature of the battle they are in. I ask you to join this battle. Your role is critical, and will take you back to the beginnings of your country's faith. You will have to ask yourselves, how long can a moderate and decent society survive without the influence of Christian institutions? How long can the tradition exist after the faith has died? What will flow into the vacuum?

Mine, of course, is a missionary role: to give daily witness to the teachings of Christ, to show the truth of Christ and to provide a living example to our Muslim neighbours of a path to a world of forgiveness, of humility, of love, of peace. Lest there be any confusion here I am not speaking of conversion. Rather, I am speaking of the fundamental truth of forgiveness which we Christians of Iraq can share, and share from a position of historically unique moral clarity. We forgive those who murdered us, who tortured us, who raped us, who sought to destroy everything about us. We forgive them. In the name of Christ, we forgive them. And so we say to our Muslim neighbours, learn this from us. Let us help you heal. Your wounds are as deep as ours. We know this. We pray for your healing. Let us heal our wounded and tortured country together.

And what about you? What can you do, living with or without any particular faith, thousands of miles away in England?

We ask that you consider our situation truthfully, as it exists for us actually, and not in stretched attempts at historical relativism, which diminishes, or more honestly, insults, the reality of our suffering, robbing us even of the dignity of our continued faith.

Concerning political support, we ask that you support efforts by your leaders to ensure equal treatment for all minorities in Iraq and elsewhere. In this we pray that your policy makers can find in themselves the humility to recognise that their theories, which over the past decades have become our horrific reality, have been almost universally wrong, based on fundamentally flawed assessments of the Iraqi people and situation. And in these mistaken policies, designed in comfort and safety from afar, argued over in the media as partisan intellectual talking points, hundreds of thousands of innocent people have died. An entire country has been ripped apart and left to the jackals. This horror all began with policy, and we beg those of you who continue to have access in shaping policy for your country, to daily remember that your policy assessments and those of your allies have life or death consequences. Please, walk humbly and make sure that you truly understand the people on whom you are passing sentence.

Finally, the West can provide material support. Here I am not speaking primarily of charitable aid, but of intelligently placed support to help us develop sustainable ways of life and income. Within Iraq the Christian community has historically been trusted providers of education and health care. –Just as it was, indeed, in the “Golden Age”. These two areas can continue to provide us with legitimate, self-sustaining platforms

in our fight to hold a meaningful place in Iraqi society from which we can continue to share Christ's message and display our Christian witness. We welcome and seek long-term partners in these fields. Perhaps some of you assembled here will think to come and share with us at our new Catholic University in Erbil, which we hope can become a beacon of religious freedom and tolerance in the heart of the Middle East.

Your government is generous with your taxes when it comes to rebuilding Iraq. Unfortunately, everything they give is sent to the UN or other third-party NGOs. I have to say that, to date, not one single penny of it, and not one single penny from the EU or the USA or any other major donor, has been offered to the schools, university or hospital of my arch-diocese. I cannot say where it goes, but most assuredly it is not seen in any of the projects that have the greatest chance of bringing diverse Iraqi groups together in peace.

Friends, we may be facing our end in the land of our ancestors. We acknowledge this. In our end, the entire world faces a moment of truth. Will a peaceful and innocent people be allowed to be persecuted and eliminated because of their faith? And, for the sake of not wanting to speak the truth to the persecutors, will the world be complicit in our elimination? The world should understand, in our path to extinction we will not go quietly any further. From this point we will speak the truth, and live out the truth, in full embrace of our Christian witness and mission, so that if someday we are gone no one will be able to say: how did this happen?

We Christians are a people of Hope. But facing the end also brings us clarity, and with it the courage to finally speak the truth. Our hope to remain in our ancient homeland now rests on the ability of ourselves, our oppressors, and the world to acknowledge these truths. Violence and discrimination against the innocents must end. Those who teach it must stop. We Christians of Iraq, who have faced 1,400 years of persecution, violence and genocide, are prepared to speak out and bear witness to our oppressors and to the world, whatever the consequence.

Please join us: name the truths and call-out the pretences.

Thank you.