

Pope Meets Ayatollah Al-Sistani In Iraq: Interfaith Outreach, Heavyweight Division

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Interfaith Outreach – heavyweight division – was on display when Pope Francis visited Iraq for four days in early March. The Pontiff met for 40 minutes with Ayatollah Al-Sistani in Najaf on March 6. Much has been made of this encounter, but after the hopeful tumult of this “historic encounter” dies down, we will likely discover that it did not result in any noticeable change in the mistreatment of Christians either in Iraq, or anywhere else in the Muslim world. A previous Jihad Watch report on the “historic” meeting is [Reuters](#), March 6, 2021:

Pope Francis entered a narrow alleyway in Iraq's holy city of Najaf to hold a historic meeting with the county's top Shi'ite cleric and visited the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham on Saturday to condemn violence in the name of God as "the greatest blasphemy."

The back-to-back inter-religious events some 200 km (125 miles) apart, one in a dusty, built-up city and the other in a desert plain, reinforced the main theme of his risky trip to Iraq – that the country has suffered far too much.

Why was the visit so "risky"? It's because the Pope was traveling in a Muslim land, where millions of people have been taught to feel hostility, even murderous hatred, toward Infidels, including Christians, and Pope Francis might well be a target of attack. Not all of them accept this inculcation, but some clearly do. The massive army presence on the Plains of Ur and in Najaf testifies to the well-grounded fear for his safety; apparently too many Iraqi Muslims did not get the Pope's memo about how "authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence."

"From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters," Francis said in Ur, where Abraham was born....

But the Qur'an, uncreated and immutable, teaches Muslims to "hate" those the Pope describes as "brothers and sisters"; no Muslim cleric would ever describe Christians or Jews as "brothers and sisters" to Muslims. How does the Pope propose to deal with what is in the Qur'an? Will he continue to avoid its actual contents, keep trying to convince himself, and his flock, and even Muslims themselves, that Islam has nothing to do with "violence" or "hate"? Muslims don't agree that the "greatest blasphemy" is in "hating our brothers and sisters."

They think, rather, that the greatest blasphemy is not to “hate” – the Qur’an overflows with hate – but to criticize or mock Muhammad, and the religion of Islam. They are prepared to murder those who are charged, however implausibly, with such blasphemy. Think of poor Asia Bibi in Pakistan.

The US invasion of 2003 plunged Iraq into years of sectarian conflict. Security has improved since the defeat of Islamic State in 2017, but Iraq continues to be a theater for global and regional score-settling, especially a bitter US-Iran rivalry that has played out on Iraqi soil.

Sistani, 90, is one of the most influential figures in Shi’ite Islam, both within Iraq and beyond, and their meeting was the first between a pope and such a senior Shi’ite cleric.

Two decades before the U.S. invasion of 2003, there had been “sectarian conflict” in Iraq. Saddam’s Arab troops had murdered 182,000 Kurds in Operation Anfal, even using chemical weapons to kill 5,000 Kurds during a single attack at Halabja. Shiite Arabs had also chafed for years under the rule of Saddam and his fellow Sunnis, intermittently rising in small-scale rebellions that were savagely, and quickly, crushed.

After the meeting, Sistani called on world religious leaders to hold great powers to account and for wisdom and sense to prevail over war. He added Christians should live like all Iraqis in peace and coexistence.

Yes, of course: Christians “should live like all Iraqis in peace and coexistence,” but Iraq’s Christians have shown just what they think of that possibility. Since 2003, 80% of them have fled the country, despairing of decent treatment, and I doubt if the Pope’s visit will end either the mistreatment of the 150,000 who still remain, or staunch the flow of Christians fleeing from Iraq. And how often did the Grand

Ayatollah Sistani, during the last two decades, make the mistreatment of Christians the subject of his writings and sermons? If he is so greatly beloved and influential a cleric, why could he not make his tolerant views prevail? He is 90 years old; where is the evidence of his urging that Christians and Jews “should live like all Iraqis in peace and coexistence”?

In a statement, Sistani said, “Religious and spiritual leadership must play a big role to put a stop to tragedy... and urge sides, especially great powers, to make wisdom and sense prevail and erase the language of war.”...

Sistani would like to “erase the language of war”? How many pages would he have to rip out of the Qur’an to “erase” its language of war? That book is in many ways a war manual, with instructions not just on when, and against whom, and why, war-making is warranted, but even provides a guide to how the spoils of war – property and women – are to be divided among the Muslim victors.

It was disturbing that Pope Francis made no allusion, at any time during his three-day visit to Iraq, to the Jews of Iraq, to their 2,500 history in the country, and to their near-total disappearance, because of violence against them, in the late 1940s and 1950s. Why did he pass over that absence/presence of Jews in silence? Couldn’t he, on the Plains of Ur or in Najaf in the presence of Al-Sistani, at least mention “our Jewish brothers and sisters”? Was it fear of offending his Muslim hosts because, while he will never admit it publicly, he knows how deeply antisemitic most Muslims are? Didn’t he want to remind his Iraqi interlocutors of the physical absence, but spiritual presence, of adherents of the third great monotheism, especially at Ur, where Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac (in the Judeo-Christian version) or Ishmael (in the Islamic version)?

A local Church official said Jews were contacted and invited but the situation for them was “complicated” particularly as they have no structured community. However, in similar past events in predominantly Muslim countries, a senior foreign Jewish figure has attended.

Of the half-dozen or so Jews left in Iraq, none dared to show up at Ur; for Jews in Iraq things were indeed “complicated” – that is, dangerous – and none wished to draw attention to themselves as representatives of Iraqi Jewry; after the Pope left, who knows what might have happened, what kind of revenge might be taken on a Jew who dared to appear at such a gathering?

“Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion,” the pope said at Ur. “We believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion; indeed, we are called unambiguously to dispel all misunderstandings,” he said...

When the Pope proclaims that “hostility, extremism and violence” are “betrayals of religion,” he ignores the fact that the Qur’an calls for – demands – that very “hostility, extremism and violence” toward non-Muslims, and so does Muhammad in the Hadith. Think of all the Qur’anic verses commanding Muslims to engage in violent Jihad, to fight, to kill, to smite at the necks of, to strike terror in the hearts of, the Infidels. Think of the dozens of military campaigns Muhammad took part in; he helped personally to slaughter 600 to 900 members of the Banu Qurayza. Think of his asking aloud, on three different occasions, about “who will rid me” of Asma bint Marwan, Ka’b ibn al-Ashraf, and Abu Afak, and each, in turn, was murdered by one of his loyal followers, pleased to be of service. The Pope either has not read, or has not understood, or prefers to willfully deceive himself because he could not dare to face the truth, such Quranic verses as

2:191-193, 3:151, 4:89, 5:33, 8:12 8:60, 9:5, 9:29, and 47:4. And what can the Pope do about the verses that tell Muslims they are the “best of peoples” (3:110), while non-Muslims “are the most vile of created beings” (98:6)? How can the Pope hope to explain away Muhammad’s remarks in the Hadith, such as “War is deceit” and “I have been made victorious through terror”?

Pope Francis has become a willing collaborator in the misrepresentation of Islam as a “peaceful and tolerant” religion. He figures if, instead of telling his Catholic flock the truth about Islam, he continues to mislead, and hews to his line that “the authentic Islam has nothing to do with violence,” Christians will be less likely to push for such reasonable defensive measures – measures that the Pope deplures – as halting immigration by Muslims into their countries, while Muslims, having been assured by the Pope that Islam has nothing to do with “hostility, extremism, and violence,” will – so the Pope fondly hopes – listen to him, and behave accordingly, rather than follow what they read in the Qur’an, in the Hadith, in 1,400 years worth of Qur’anic commentary, and the sermons they have heard from such contemporary clerics as the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the late Sheikh Abdel-Aziz Bin Baz, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb, and Yousuf al-Qaradawi.

The Muslims who have attacked Christians in Iraq, since 2003 driving 80% of them out of the country were not “Islamists” following some bizarre variant of the true peaceful Islam. There were, of course, among those persecuting and killing Christians in Iraq, the fanatics who were members of the Islamic State. But most of the 1.2 million Christians who fled Iraq did so before the Islamic State appeared; their tormentors were ordinary Muslims, acting upon the teachings of Islam, not a factitious “Islamism.”

At Ur, Francis praised young Muslims for helping Christians repair their churches “when terrorism invaded the north of this beloved country.”...

Yes, the handful of young Muslims who helped repair churches are to be commended, for they were ignoring the Islamic command that forbids Christians (and Jews) from repairing their houses of worship. As is written in the Pact of Umar: “we [Christians] made this stipulation with you, that we will not erect in our city or the suburbs any new monastery, church, cell or hermitage; that we will not repair any of such buildings that may fall into ruins...” Perhaps they concluded, in jesuitical fashion, that “we are not Christians, therefore we – though not the Christians themselves – can repair these churches.”

One sympathizes with the difficult conditions of the Christians in Iraq, who live in fear of attacks by Muslims – even in the absence of the Islamic State – and understand their hope the Pope’s friendly meeting with al-Sistani might just change that behavior. But we can’t allow the Pope’s naïve interfaith-outreach sentiments to distract us from the permanent threat that arises naturally from the texts and teachings of Islam.

Meanwhile, Ayatollah Al-Sistani may want to remove a certain infamous page from his website. It’s a list of what, according to Muslims, including Al-Sistani, are the “unclean” (najis) things. Here’s that list:

Najis (impure) things:

1. *urine;*
2. *faeces;*
3. *semen;*
4. *corpse;*
5. *blood;*
6. *dog;*
7. *pig;*
8. *disbeliever (kafir);*
9. *wine;*
10. *sweat of an excrement-eating animal*

And if Al-Sistani still doesn't remove that list, or at least Item #8, after that supposedly "historic meeting" in Najaf between himself and the Pope, when they exchanged bromides about hope for a better world, I trust that the world's media will reproduce this list and send it far and wide, including to the Vatican, with a question included for Francis: *Would Pope Francis care to comment on this list found at the official website of his new BFF?*

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