



HOPE: A billboard showing Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, with Arabic that reads, "You are a part of us and we are a part of you," hangs on a street in Baghdad, Iraq PICTURE: Khalid Mohammed/AP

# Stubborn Pope is on a journey for peace

IT IS ironic that a country which was once described as hell on earth was also the birthplace of Abraham who gave the world three great religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Iraq has been a troubled nation since it was carved out of the Ottoman Empire and given to the British. First a monarchy and then a republic after independence, it fell into the hands of the Arab Social Ba'ath Party in 1968.

Once known as the 'cradle of civilisation' – Iraq was where the world's first writing system was developed – but it is better known today for the bloody rule of Saddam Hussein and two recent wars led by the United States: the first a grand coalition to drive Saddam out of Kuwait after he invaded the country; the second an ill-judged revenge attack by George W Bush.

Tony Blair's reputation will ever be sullied by association. He was Bush's enabler – bringing the UK into the war on the basis of the fiction that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction.

The number who died in that conflict is still not known – hundreds of thousands of innocent people lost their lives, possibly over a million. While the war itself was indefensible, an even greater crime was the mismanagement of the peace. Having stripped the country of any semblance of government, the allies walked away and left the factions there to fight over the place. The result was further death and destruction as ISIS used terror to impose an Islamic state. Appalling crimes against humanity were perpetrated – without, it must be said, any sense of responsibility in Washington or London.

Following the defeat of ISIS, civil society is trying to reassert itself – constantly undermined by the continuing tensions in the region – not least between the United States and neighbour Iran. Poverty is rife, and

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Covid-19 has taken its toll in a country whose health-care system has been ripped apart.

Understanding the background makes Pope Francis's visit to Iraq last weekend all the more remarkable. Previous planned visits by John Paul II and Benedict XVI had been called off, and there was more than enough justification to cancel this one – not least the risk of spreading Covid at the inevitable gatherings. The pope's belief that God would protect the faithful is at odds with the science of Covid. But Francis has shown himself to be stubborn at times, and he was determined this visit to Iraq would not be put off.

It may go down as one of the most important moments of his pontificate. Ostensibly the visit was to show solidarity with the dwindling numbers of Christians in the country – reckoned now to be in the region of 250,000.

The two are not unconnected, but it is

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the rapprochement with Islam that has the power to be transformative. The world will not be at peace until the forces of Islam and Christianity find a way of coexisting in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Of all the images from the trip, the most potent was an unassuming shot of the pope, dressed in his traditional white, sitting alongside the Shiite grand ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in black. al-Sistani's voice has the power to bring down governments, and the battle against ISIS was won in part because he urged young Shiites to join the army to fight it.

After their meeting, the pope got the words he wanted when al-Sistani released a statement saying Christians had to right to live like all Iraqis "in security and peace and with full constitutional rights".

Putting his faith in their common brotherhood with Abraham, the pope said: "Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion."

He went on to say: "Believers cannot be silent when terrorism abuses religion."

That can be read as a rebuke to those who have distorted Islam in pursuit of power, and who have inflicted enormous pain on innocent people across the world. But it is also a rebuke to so-called Christians – here and abroad – who have demonised Muslims, victimised them, and marginalised them.

Increasingly frail, and under attack from a reactionary Church within the Church, Francis knows he has a limited time to cement his mission. More trips are planned, including to Lebanon (another victim state), he is determined to make a difference and bring people together. But the world needs to respond too – civil society and elected leaders – if we are to build a global society built on mutual respect for our common humanity.

## ON THIS DAY

MARCH 11 1971

### 3 Soldiers Slain

THREE young Scots soldiers, including two brothers, were shot dead through the head in a horror slaying in the village of Ligoniel, about three miles from Belfast, last night.

Their bodies, bundled on top of one another, were found in a small roadway at White Brae, Squire's Hill. They were later identified as Fusilier John McCaig; his brother, Fusilier Joseph McCaig, both from Ayr; and Fusilier Dougal McCaughey from Glasgow. All were in their early twenties. Their bodies were discovered after local residents reported hearing at least five shots.

This morning, the Provisional wing of the IRA said none of their units were involved in the killings. A spokesman said: 'We have checked with all our units in Belfast and wish to state that none of them carried out any actions last night.' The Official group of the Movement also disclaimed responsibility.

The soldiers were off-duty Royal Highland Fusiliers in civilian clothes but it was not clear early today what the circumstances were leading up to the killings. One report said the soldiers had been ordered out of a local pub at gunpoint and taken a short distance up a small, narrow link-road when they were shot through the head.

The slayings brought reactions of shock and horror from the Stormont Prime Minister, Mr Chichester-Clark who is expected back in Belfast today from London where he has been on official business. The Chief Constable, Mr Graham Shillington also expressed his shock and horror.

The Central Citizens' Defence Committee said: 'Strong enough words cannot be found to express the horror and revulsion of all decent people at the foul murder of three young soldiers last night.... [Their murderers] are Godless monsters.'

An Army officer at the scene said the soldiers were deliberately murdered. 'The men were lured to their deaths and then shot. Obviously they never had a chance.'

#### Discrimination under Corporation

REPUBLICAN Labour Councillor James O'Kane has accused Belfast Corporation Electricity Department of discrimination against Catholics in employment. These are the numbers holding positions in the various sections of the Department, the first figures represent Protestants, the second Catholics: Meter inspectors – 91, 4; Installation Department – 40, 3; Testers – 11, 1; Clerical staff – 200, 4; Power Station West – 450, 10; Power Station East – 194, 6.

THE brutal murders of three young off-duty Scottish soldiers, lured to their deaths from a city-centre pub 50 years ago today, shocked the entire community. The incident signalled the north's descent into total violence. Despite denials, the Provisional IRA were responsible.

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