

In *The Baghdad Eucharist*, an Iraqi Christian family weathers Saddam, U.S. invasion, and ISIS

## **Sinan Antoon's acclaimed novel, now out in English, sheds light on the realities faced by Christians in Iraq.**

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue



Sinan Antoon. Photo by Ibtisam Azem.

Sinan Antoon is a star of modern Arab fiction, a multiply honored novelist whose books address critical questions of identity, memory, and history. He has an Iraqi Christian background but teaches at New York University—a dislocation that

resembles that of so many Middle Eastern Christians in recent years. Antoon's most recently translated novel, *The Baghdad Eucharist*, offers Westerners an unparalleled opportunity to understand these events. The book traces the historic catastrophe that has overcome—and is now uprooting—one of the world's oldest Christian communities.

When it appeared in 2013 under the title *Ya Mariam* ("Hail Mary"), *The Baghdad Eucharist* was acclaimed across the Arab literary world. With dazzling economy, the book tells the story of a community by focusing on one day in the life of a once-prosperous Chaldean Christian family in 2010, at the height of the Islamist campaign against the churches. The family tries to make sense of the repeated bombings and massacres, the kidnappings and persecutions. The young wife, Maha, sees no hope in the vortex of hatred that has overtaken the country. Her elderly cousin Youssef is more sanguine. He reminisces about the good times in the recent past, when Iraqis tried to build a secular, prosperous nation free of religious bigotry and sectarianism. Maha can relate to nothing in what he says. Since childhood, she has known only a world of inexplicable savagery. She struggles to understand why one of her uncles was kidnapped and murdered.

Maha and Youssef are the remnants of what was once a large and prosperous family. Successive disasters have ruined their fortunes, and that of the nation. The turning point was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990, which provoked international sanctions and then the first Gulf War of 1991. In 1993–94, the previously secular Iraqi regime turned to strict forms of Salafist Islamic piety, and a "faith campaign" closed down Christian businesses that sold alcohol. (The trade had always been forbidden to Muslims.) As the economy disintegrates, the Gorgis family turns its backyard into a general store. The U.S. invasion in 2003 unleashed new nightmares—the insurgency against government forces and sectarian warfare between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. By 2010, the local al-Qaeda faction is on the verge of metastasizing into what the world came to know as ISIS, and it demonstrates its piety by slaughtering Christians.

Successive events have driven some members of the family into exile in Canada, Sweden, or Australia, where they enjoy successful careers. From the diaspora, they plead with Maha and Youssef to join them before it is too late. Youssef, though, is philosophical. He knows that Christians have always been part of the Iraqi world and in fact have a better claim than anyone to being the original inhabitants of the country. His whole life and culture is firmly rooted in this shattered land. How can he

contemplate leaving? And how can anyone imagine an Iraq without Christians? But a chilling flashback recalls a Jewish childhood friend forced to flee to Israel in the 1950s. As the grim Iraqi adage warns, after Saturday comes Sunday: Jews are expelled first, then Christians.

Scarcely less traumatic than the violence is the estrangement forced upon those Christians who had always seen themselves as thoroughly Iraqi. Suddenly they find themselves stigmatized as foreign, the puppets of America and imperialism. A hostile civil servant asks what kind of name is Gorgis anyway? Is it American? The family become exiles in their own land long before any siblings board their flights to Canada.

Antoon's account of the family's Christian faith is beautifully measured. Youssef is anything but a fanatic, and he is quite prepared to contemplate converting to Islam if it will win him the woman he loves. Yet family members attend church regularly, and older relatives are passionately involved in their devotions, with a special love for the Holy Mother, Mary. What they all have in common is that Christianity is part of their most basic identity: it is the air they breathe.

*The Baghdad Eucharist* offers many lessons, not least about the political trajectory that it describes. Antoon has condemned the U.S. invasion in 2003 as a crime of historic proportions, which performed the near miracle of creating a situation worse than that prevailing under Saddam Hussein. But the Gorgis family saga also tells us much about Middle Eastern Christianity more generally—about its historic connections with the land and the global diaspora that has now become a central reality of existence. Other Christian communities in the region, especially Egypt's Copts, must read it with trepidation.

*A version of this article, which was edited on June 29 to identify the family as Chaldean rather than Assyrian, appears in the print edition under the title "Sinan Antoon's The Baghdad Eucharist."*