

# Christians and lions

The world's most widely followed faith is gathering persecutors. Even non-Christians should worry about that



**C**HRISTIANITY is growing almost as fast as humanity itself, but its 2.2 billion adherents cannot count on safety in numbers. That is partly because the locus of the world's largest religion is shifting to hotter (in several senses) parts of the world.

According to a report published by the Pew Forum in December, the Christian share of the population of sub-Saharan Africa has soared over the past century, from 9% to 63%. Meanwhile, the think-tank says, the Christian proportion of Europeans and people in the Americas has dropped, respectively, from 95% to 76% and from 96% to 86%.

But moving from the jaded north to the dynamic south does not portend an easy future. In Nigeria scores of Christians have died in Islamist bomb attacks, targeting Christmas prayers. In Iran and Pakistan Christians are on death row, for "apostasy"-quitting Islam—or blasphemy. Dozens of churches in Indonesia have been attacked or shut. Two-thirds of Iraq's pre-war Christian population have fled. In Egypt and Syria, where secular despots gave Christianity a shield of sorts, political upheaval and Muslim zeal threaten ancient Christian groups. Not all Christianity's woes are down to Muslims. The faith faces harassment in formally communist China and Vietnam. In India Hindu nationalists want to penalise Christians who make converts. In the Holy Land local churches are caught between Israeli encroachment on their property and Islamist bids to monopolise Palestinian life. Followers of Jesus may yet become a rarity in his homeland.

Compared both with the wars of religion that once tore Christendom apart and with various modern intra-faith strug-

gles, such as those within Islam, little blood is being spilt. But the brutality matters. Even if Western powers no longer see promoting Christianity's interests as a geopolitical priority, it is hard to imagine American evangelicals ignoring a full-scale clamp down on house churches in China. And whatever their own beliefs, Western voters have other reasons to worry about the fate of Christians. Regimes or societies that persecute Christians tend to oppress other minorities too. Sunni Muslims who demonise Christians loathe Shias. Once religion is involved, any conflict becomes harder to solve.

## Just don't call it a crusade

Among liberal values, the freedom to profess any religion or none has a central place. America's government is bound by law to promote that liberty. In line with its own ideals, America is rightly as concerned by the persecution of Muslims of any stripe as by the travails of Christians in China or Jews and Bahais in Iran. And it objects when Christian lands, like Belarus, practise persecution. Other more secular Western countries should do more to defend that right.

What about those who see persecuting other religions as part of their calling? No faith is blameless: from Delhi to Jerusalem many of those stirring up hatred are men of God. But there is a specific problem with Islam. Islamic law (though not the Koran) has often mandated death for people leaving the faith. There are signs of change. The 57-member Organisation of Islamic Co-operation has, with American encouragement, toned down its bid to outlaw "blasphemy" in various UN resolutions. It also condemned the attacks in Nigeria. But more Muslim leaders need to accept that changing creed is a legal right. On that one point, the West should not back down. Otherwise believers, whether Christian or not, remain in peril.

## Iraq

# Make it federal

If their country is to function, Iraqis need to share power



**B**ARACK OBAMA put a brave face on the ignominious exit, just before Christmas, of all American troops, once numbering around 170,000, from Iraq. He was fulfilling an election promise to extricate America from a war he never supported, that cost more than 4,400 American lives and \$800 billion, and earned his country the enmity of much of the world, especially of Arabs and Muslims. The president sought to reassure those who worry about an over-speedy exit that Iraq is not the bloodbath it once was. It has held pretty fair elections. It has a coalition government led by a solid-looking prime minister. Its copious oil is flowing faster again. And it is again undeniably

sovereign. Time, then, for the West to heave a huge sigh of relief and for Iraqis to stride towards democracy and prosperity?

If only. For one thing, the manner of Mr Obama's retreat was not what he had chosen. He had been persuaded by his generals and by his new CIA boss, General David Petraeus, a former commander in Iraq, that a residual American force of 10,000 or so troops should stay, with Iraqi acquiescence, to help keep the peace for a year or two, while the country's still fragile democracy was more firmly entrenched. Instead, the most anti-American of Iraq's leading politicians, Muqtada al-Sadr, who is close to Iran, forced Nuri al-Maliki, the prime minister, on pain of rekindling an insurgency, to tell all American soldiers to leave. However glossily presented, America's influence in Iraq is now negligible, its clout in the region severely diminished. And Iraq itself, once one of the Arab world's leading

- countries, is an unloved and unenvied cockpit of regional rivalry, especially between Saudis, Persians and Turks.

Perhaps it is just as well that the Iraqis should have to sort out their future themselves. But, judging by the past few years, they do not look set to do so sensibly (see page 29). Iraq is still as dangerous as Afghanistan. Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, its three biggest cities, are still unsafe for investors unless they take elaborate and costly precautions. Al-Qaeda still has a lurking presence. Sectarian fissures still gape. Iraq's necessary three-way compact between Shia Arabs (around 60% of the people), Sunni Arabs (20%) and Kurds (20%) is still holding, but only just. Mr Maliki, a Shia, is steadily becoming less democratic and more vindictive towards Sunnis, including those within his ruling coalition who will not kowtow to him. Immediately after the Americans left, he saw to it that Iraq's Sunni vice-president was charged with terrorism and called for a deputy prime minister, another Sunni, to be ousted. The belligerent Mr Sadr is as menacing as ever.

The Shias are reluctant, after a century as underdogs, to grant a decent share of power to the Sunnis, who ran the show under Saddam Hussein and before. Arab Iraqis of all stripes still tend to view the Kurds as a fifth column bent on peeling off

altogether, grabbing some of the best oilfields and breaking up the Arab nation. Few Iraqi politicians seem able to put country above religious sect or ethnicity. Minority rights are disrespected. Intolerance prevails. Whether occupied by Americans or not, Iraq woefully lacks a sense of nationhood.

#### An American legacy after all

The least bad way ahead, if the country is to avoid another bloodbath or an eventual break-up, is to enact a federal formula, already provided for by the constitution. The Kurds, enjoying an unprecedented measure of autonomy, have long been keen on this. Most of Iraq's Sunni Arabs have hitherto loathed the idea, seeing it as a conspiracy to do them down and to belittle a great nation. But they should now think again. Mr Maliki's best chance of making Iraq work is to go federal.

Having had a crude democracy thrust upon them, Iraqis missed out on the Arab spring. But if there is one good precedent for them to set it would be to fashion a functioning federal system. This would be a first for Arabs. Even under democracy, they tend to view a strongman at the centre as a prerequisite for stability. But Iraq should be shared-and then America might yet claim to have left a worthwhile legacy after all.

## Economics blogs **A less dismal debate**

### Blogs are blamed for cheapening debate in some fields. Yet they have enriched economics



**L**ET Truth and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" asked John Milton in *Areopagitica*, his rousing defence of a free press, in 1644. But in an era when a blog can be set up with a few

clicks, not everyone agrees that more voices and more choices improve the quality of debate. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard law professor, has argued that by allowing people to retreat into "information cocoons" or "echo chambers" in which they hear only views they agree with, the blogosphere fosters polarisation-a fear widely shared by politicians. *Forbes* once called blogs "the prized platform of an online lynch mob spouting liberty but spewing lies, libel and invective".

Previous publishing revolutions, such as the advent of printing, prompted similar concerns about trivialisation and extremism. But whatever you think about the impact of blogging on political, scientific or religious debate, it is hard to argue that the internet has cheapened the global conversation about economics. On the contrary, it has improved it.

Research (by two blogging economists at the World Bank) suggests that academic papers cited by bloggers are far more likely to be downloaded. Blogging economists are regarded more highly than non-bloggers with the same publishing record. Blogs have given ideas that failed to prosper in the academic marketplace, such as the "Austrian" theory of the business cycle, another airing (see page 51-54). They have also given voice to once-obscurer scholars advancing bold solutions to America's economic funk and Europe's self-inflicted crisis.

A good example is Scott Sumner of Bentley University, who

believes that America's Federal Reserve should promise to restore "nominal" **GDP** (as opposed to "real" **GDP**, which takes account of inflation) to its pre-crisis path. Since inflation is in line with the Fed's implicit target yet nominal **GDP** is more than 1% below its pre-crisis path, Mr Sumner's proposal might require a far more expansive monetary policy than anything the Fed has so far considered. This idea was discussed decades ago, but fell into obscurity in the years before the crisis, when inflation-targeting seemed to work. Alternatives to that conventional wisdom are suddenly a live topic, and blogs have brought experts on them out of the shadows.

#### There once were two cats of Kilkenny

The back-and-forth between bloggers resembles the informal chats, in university hallways and coffee rooms, that have always stimulated economic research, argues Paul Krugman, a Nobel-prizewinning economist who blogs at the *New York Times*. But moving the conversation online means that far more people can take part. Admittedly, for every lost prophet there is a crank who is simply lost. Yet despite the low barriers to entry, blogs do impose some intellectual standards. Errors of fact or logic are spotted, ridiculed and corrected. Areas of disagreement are highlighted and sometimes even narrowed. Some of the best contributors do not even have blogs of their own, serving instead as referees, leaving thoughtful comments on other people's sites and often criss-crossing party lines.

This debate is not always polite. But was it ever? The arguments between John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek in the 1930s, some of them published in academic journals, were not notable for their tact. One observer likened their exchanges to the brawling of "Kilkenny cats". Both men, one suspects, would have relished taking their battle online.