

WORLD DOMINION

The World Dominion Movement advocates Informed Continuous Co-ordinated Evangelism to reach everyone at home and abroad. Its basis is belief in the Deity and Atoning Death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the World's Only Saviour, and in the Final Authority of Holy Scripture.

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The Assyrians in Iraq

R. C. CUMBERLAND

There is an Assyrian problem in Iraq. Toward its solution the Iraqi Government, Protestant missions and the League of Nations have all contributed. The article in the October number of *WORLD DOMINION*, written by an Assyrian, Dr. Petros de Baz, and the following article by one of our correspondents, an American, the Rev. R. C. Cumberland, give us on the one hand the ex-parte statement of a fervid nationalist, and on the other, the detached, balanced statement of a trained missionary. Both articles should be read in order to appreciate a disturbing situation, and the fine efforts which are now being made equitably and generously to deal with it.

I OPENED *WORLD DOMINION* for October at my home in Dohuk, where I am in the midst of Nestorian Christian Assyrians, and was considerably surprised and certainly interested to light upon an article from the pen of Dr. Petros, dealing with these people with whom I have been in intimate contact ever since I came to Iraq in April, 1923.

Having had several long conversations with the writer concerning his compatriots, I became aware that, in his desire to secure outside sympathy for them, he had permitted his article to take the form of special pleading. To redress the balance of fact and to hold it level will render the truest service to the Assyrians.

It may be well to begin with an attempt to clear up some terminology and history. *Assyrians* is the racial term for the people under consideration; how closely they may be related to the ancient Assyrians is a matter for ethnologists to determine. Their language is known as *Syriac*. The spoken language, varying somewhat in various tribes and localities, is so far different from the ancient Syriac of the Gospel manuscripts, still used in the Nestorian liturgies, that none but the very few scholars can understand the church services.

The Assyrians of Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan are to be distinguished sharply from those of the Urumia plain in Persia; the former are those with whom we are now concerned. There are two principal religious divisions

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of the Assyrians: the Nestorians and the Chaldeans. *Nestorian* is a misleading term and is not the official one; it came from the fact that the "heretic," Nestorius, was received by the Church, but the Church never accepted the heretical doctrine attributed to him. Mar Shimon, the "Nestorian Patriarch," signs himself as Catholicus, Patriarch of the East, but the nick-name is more convenient and is the one commonly used. *Chaldean* is the name that was given to the Uniat Church formed in 1552, when there was a dispute over the succession to the Patriarchate; one of the contending parties appealed to Rome, and Pope Julius III consecrated him Patriarch of the new sect (under Rome) that was formed of his followers. There is also a small group of evangelicals, not formally organized into a Church, because it was hoped by the evangelizing missionaries that these would communicate some spiritual life to the Nestorians by remaining in the fold, and that, in turn, there might be a revival of the ancient Nestorian missionary enterprise. Dr. Petros' father was a leader in the evangelical group, and Dr. Petros was educated in the mission schools.

Near the beginning of the Great War the Assyrians threw in their lot with the Allies; a natural move, since Germany was backing Turkey, for whom the Assyrians had no love. They gathered in the Urumia plain and held out against heavy odds for a long time. For part of the time they were in control and did to the Muslim section of the population there the kind of thing that has since been their stock-in-trade in rousing the sympathy of Christendom for themselves. In 1918 they were able to hold out no longer, and trekked down through Persia to the camp at Baquba which the British provided for them. After a year there, where they were forced to live hygienically and had opportunities for learning many useful things, the mountain Assyrians were removed to Mindan, north of Mosul, where a camp was established for some time. From there they were scattered amongst the villages of the Mosul district, and in this region most of them still remain.

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Settlement was by no means an easy problem. In many ways this is not an attractive country. Summer heat and winter cold are severe; the standard of living is low; disease is rampant; all conditions not far different from those of their former homes. Naturally, the inhabitants of the country, mostly Kurds and Yezidis, had for generations been occupying the best village sites and tilling the best soil and grazing their flocks in the best pastures. These cannot be ejected to make place for the Assyrians, and it is not strange that they did not look upon these newcomers of an alien race and language and religion with any favour. Indeed, the remarkable thing is that the Assyrian settlement was accomplished with so little friction as there actually was.

When the Mindan camp was broken up, the Assyrians were given a cash grant of a hundred and twenty-two rupees for each person, man, woman and child, and were allowed to choose their places, as far as possible. For some (the people of Berwer) settlement was repatriation, their homes being on the Iraqi side. Some others, with what they considered British support, went back in 1923 to their homes in Tiari and Tkhuma, on the Turkish side of the provisional boundary. In 1924, however, some of the Tkhuma people wantonly attacked a small civilian Turkish party and killed some of them. Shortly afterwards, as might be expected, all Assyrians were driven from the Turkish side by armed forces. These are the people who have had the most difficulty in getting satisfactorily settled in Iraq. The British authorities have constantly helped them in their negotiations, and the settlement of the Assyrians is now almost complete.

A military force of some three thousand, known as the Iraq Levies, was enlisted from among the Assyrian young men. It was placed under British officers and received British pay (a higher rate than that of the Iraq Army) and has constituted the principal source of cash income for the Assyrian people. In 1926, when the general census was taken, all Assyrians who were former Turkish subjects were registered as Iraqis if they were willing. Nevertheless

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a surprisingly large majority of them refused such registration. The Persian Assyrians were placed in a separate category, and were not given Iraqi citizenship except in certain cases. Assyrians coming into the country since that time are, of course, dealt with according to the general naturalization laws of the country.

One further term needs comment: *refugee*. Many of the Assyrians still love to use that word to designate themselves, though they have been in this country since 1918, and all but a few of them are settled in villages in as much comfort and security as they had in their homes before the War. It is quite true, as Dr. Petros says, that their economic and hygienic conditions are bad; but they are no worse than those of the Kurds and Yezidis who have been here for generations—in many cases they are better. A large part of my work as an evangelist in this district is touring, in the course of which I visit all kinds of villages. In the basic matters of food, clothing, shelter, health and general welfare, Assyrian villages rank above, rather than below, the average. This is, of course, distinctly to their credit; they have taken places of inferior natural advantages and, by hard work, have made them habitable. But the point is this: being on a parity with the citizens of the country in which they, uninvited aliens, have been received and given citizenship, the Assyrians have no right to pose before the rest of the world as refugees.

Their status as a religious minority in this country, and their security here have received sufficient attention from the press and the League of Nations, and need not be elaborated. This much may be said, however, the fulfilment of the guarantees of the rights of minorities given by Iraq to the League will be helped by an attitude of confidence and co-operation on the part of the Assyrians. So far, there has been little evidence of such an attitude. By frantic appeals to Europe for "rescue," and by telling their people that they may be moving from here at any time, the leaders of the Assyrians have gone far to frustrate the efforts of those who have sought a peaceful and satisfactory settlement for them in this country. It is not

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surprising that the Arabs and Kurds do not take kindly to the idea of this aggressive little group being backed by the vaguely understood, but certainly powerful, "Christian" nations, because they make demands for special rights and privileges. Moreover, the foolish political talk of the last two or three years has aroused a high degree of resentful hostility in the older inhabitants of the country.

All this, with assurances to the Assyrians by their leaders that they are in danger from which they must flee, has developed a psychology of fear in them which separates them from the rest of the community; thus the vicious circle of suspicion is completed. It will be broken only by an open recognition on the part of the Assyrians that their lot is cast in this country and that their welfare is bound up with the development of Iraq, in which they may have an important share if they co-operate as loyal Iraqis. I do not mean that there is any magic by which all problems will be solved. It is the Assyrians' move. If they maintain their present attitude of suspicion, assuming that they are in danger, they probably are. "According to your faith be it unto you," is no idle saying; they will find what they look for.

I shall now deal in detail with the items in Dr. Petros' article:—

1. *The Levies.* These, as Dr. Petros said, have been reduced in number, but his prediction that they would be disbanded on the termination of the British mandate has not been fulfilled. Last June the Assyrian officers of the Levies announced that they would lay down their arms unless certain demands were granted. A temporary expedient was found, but that move on the part of the Levies did much to ruin whatever confidence in the dependability of the Assyrians there may have been. In spite of that they are being given the option of enlistment in the guards of the British Royal Air Force stations stipulated in the treaty.

2. *The Iraq Petroleum Company* and other companies are obliged, by the terms of their contracts, to produce oil

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and make it available at seaboard within a few years, and any pause in their operations must be brief. There are many Assyrians working for these oil companies, and there might be more if more were qualified. Iraqi citizenship is a usual and not unreasonable qualification for such employment.

3. *Foreign Missions.* The principal missionary work amongst the Nestorians is carried on under the auspices of the Protestant Episcopal Church of North America, and is directed by the Rev. John B. Panfil, who has been in Mosul since 1925 and speaks Syriac fluently. The programme of work has varied at times. At present there is a school for boys and girls in Mosul, with an enrolment of nearly two hundred. Here, ancient and modern Syriac, Arabic and English are taught, together with the usual curriculum. There are also smaller schools in twenty-five outlying villages, with eight hundred students. Accommodation for students who have passed through these village schools is furnished in Mosul. Medical work is carried on in places not reached by the Government Health Service, and a doctor in Mosul is available for serious cases. Industrial work in Mosul includes a rug factory and a sewing school.

A lesser work, so far as the Assyrians are concerned, is carried on by the United Mission in Mesopotamia—a union project of three American denominations. It furnishes the salaries and supervision of Assyrian evangelical churches in Baghdad and Mosul. The two principal lay workers in those cities speak Syriac and are in touch with many of the people. In the rural district of northern Iraq, where most of the Assyrians are settled, all six of the workers under my direction are Assyrians, two ordained and four laymen. All are assigned to general evangelistic work, and all of them are in places where there are many Assyrians. What I have to urge is the necessity of reaching others as well as Assyrians. Preaching services are held in Syriac at varying intervals, in not less than twenty-five villages, and the majority of those attending my regular Sunday services here in Dohuk are Assyrians.

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4. *Diseases.* What Dr. Petros says under this head is true in general, but it is not the whole story. I am quite ready to bear witness to the difficulties of the climate of Iraq. The Assyrians, however, are settled in the best part of the country, so far as climate is concerned. None of them are in the regions of the great swamps. In several cases I know of they have been urged to settle at a distance from places where water naturally collects, on account of the danger of malaria, but they have insisted on going to places where they can grow rice, a favourite article of diet with them. In many other cases, such as that of Mokoobli, cited by Dr. Petros, a reasonable amount of work would drain the small piece of swamp. The Assyrians, however, were assured by their leaders that they were temporary refugees; the nerve of enterprise was thus cut, and they supinely submitted to their fate. In this and similar cases the Assyrians are the more blameworthy because they have had the opportunity, in the camps at Baquba and Mindan, to know the technique and value of sanitation.

It is discouraging to see a whole people, and especially the men of the Levies, revert to the vile and insanitary customs of their former life as soon as external compulsion is removed: village streets littered with animal and human refuse; unwashed children and filthy houses. The diseases prevalent in this country naturally attack Assyrians as well as others. They have been very lax in putting into practice what they have learned about the prevention of disease. As for medical care, they have had more than any other element of the population, for, until recently, nearly all the Government doctors in Mosul Province have been nominal Christians, and if any favouritism has been shown it has been to their fellow Christians. In addition, special services, specifically for the Assyrians, have been given by the Near East Relief and by the mission represented by Mr. Panfil. Recently a number of new Government dispensaries have been opened in districts settled by Assyrians.

5. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church (through

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its local agency, the Chaldean Uniat Church) wishes to take the Assyrians into its fold. Many of them have been its members for several generations (the origin of the Chaldeans was noted in the first part of this article). If there is reality in the spiritual life of the Nestorian Church, it will make itself evident not only by maintaining its integrity but also by growth. If there is not, its "bowing to Rome" is no loss.

6. Dr. Petros did not enter Iraq with the main body of his people and so was not included in the enrolment of Assyrians as Iraqis. The naturalization law requires three years' residence; there appears to be no reason for an exception being made in his case. As a matter of fact, however, the Government has treated him very well, having granted to him, even before he can acquire citizenship, the post of Government doctor, with a good salary, at Ain Sefni, the centre of a district in which many of the Assyrians are settled and from which many of the complaints regarding health have come. Thus he is able to accomplish at Government expense his avowed purpose of helping his people as a normal part of the local situation—surely the most desirable way.

There is no doubt that many of the Assyrians, if they should read this, would regard me as their implacable enemy, because I not only make no sentimental plea for their rescue, but also lay the principal blame for their present unhappy condition where it belongs: on themselves, and especially on their leaders. During all my nine years in Iraq the best friends I have had amongst the people of the country have been Assyrians. I yield to none in not only wishing, but also seeking, the welfare of the Assyrian people. That welfare is not, however, promoted by over-stressing the hardships of their condition. Their rescue from their present plight cannot come from a foreign power, either Governmental or religious, but rather from a frank recognition of their own responsibility for most of their present difficulties, a determination to co-operate with their neighbours and a living faith in God.