
Interview: Father Joseph Habbi

Iraqi intellectual: 'History is made by ideas, not by might or money'

The Patriarchal Vicar General for Cultural Affairs, and Dean of the Babylon University College, was interviewed for EIR by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach on July 27, at the Patriarchate of the Chaldean Church of Babylon in Baghdad. The interview was conducted in Italian.

EIR: Can you tell me about the project for a new university?

Habbi: The project was the Patriarch's [The Most Reverend Raphael Bidawid]. As soon as he was elected, in May of 1989, he thought of uplifting the level of philosophical theological studies in Iraq, and also, in general, of giving the Church an important cultural institution and making this institution an instrument for cultural dialogue with all the Iraqis, above all with the "brains" who are in the country. I was appointed to be in charge of this project, as the rector of this philosophical-theological university college. My two colleagues at the beginning, in May 1990, were the rector of the Major Seminary, and a Dominican priest who is known for his scholarship, who also conducts a well-attended theological circle in Baghdad. Soon afterward, we saw that it was necessary to ask for official authorization in order to function with greater freedom and flexibility and also with greater range. So then we drew up a plan, which was presented to the ministry in July 1990, after having met with the minister of higher education in Baghdad. At first it was still only a project for a religious university college of philosophy and theology, which we opened last November.

But after consulting friends, and above all university professors, and Christian people, and also Muslims, about the project, we were advised that since in Iraq for the past five years it has been possible to open private university colleges, officially recognized under the supervision of the ministry of higher education, it would be good to upgrade and expand the project, and to present a fuller one. The present plan for the Babylon University College provides for four faculties: English, French, history and culture, and finally philosophy and theology. We were all set to launch a grand plan, when at the last minute we found out, and it was also reported in the press, that the ministry has suspended all permits to open new private university colleges for one year. Just three days

ago the Patriarch and I met with the higher education minister, who received us very kindly, and assured us that ours will be the first permit to be granted as soon as this year is out. The suspension was decided in order to study the profile of these private university colleges better, because after they granted some permits, they saw that some people were taking advantage of this to turn these institutes into more money-making than cultural activities.

The minister is sure that our project has culture, and not business or trade, as its primary and ultimate aim. In fact he knows very well that our university college will be in the vanguard with respect to other similar institutions, but it is clear that he cannot make an exception before the one-year waiting period, which the government has officially established, has passed.

So this year we will continue in the church framework unless new possibilities arise to open the new college in October or November. We will have our philosophy and theology students like last year, not just seminarians, but also monks, nuns, and laymen. We will also have language courses, especially English and French, and music, because for us music and art are very important things; we believe that art is a very important means to make man more human.

EIR: Can you say anything more about this course of studies, especially the cultural aspect? You spoke of music—what kind of music?

Habbi: Last year we had three music professors, a Muslim, a priest, and a Christian layman, who teach all the essential elements of music, and also what they call—these are technical things which I don't understand very well—music "appreciation," i.e., the differences between occidental and oriental music, which is very important for us, and then the different musical genres, music history, and then also classical music, with the scores and the various instruments, especially organ and violin. For the other faculties, even for English and French, we have introduced some study materials which are not the usual ones in corresponding colleges which teach English and French in Iraq. We also included psychology, the science of pedagogy, because we would like

to prepare these subjects not only for using the language, but also to teach it, and then we have a program to reinforce also the study of art history relative to these tongues.

So the student would need to have an overview of all the literature, also with the comparative study of literatures. This is an area very close to my heart, because I think one literature should not be isolated from the others. As to the history faculty, we have also introduced ancient languages which are usually not taught in Iraq, or very little, such as Greek and Latin, and then, of course, also the ancient Iraqi languages, Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyro-Babylonian, Aramaic, Syriac, etc. We have also introduced history of ancient art and history of world art, of all branches of art—not just sculpture, but also music and so forth. All these degree programs last four years, which is normal in the Iraqi universities, except the philosophy and theology majors, which will take five years, as in the most celebrated international universities, and also at the Vatican. In the philosophy and theology faculty we introduced several interesting subjects, for example, foreign languages. We won't just teach English as a language, but we will also teach some subjects in English. And within two or three years we will also teach some subjects in French, if possible, such that the student will not only learn the language, but the terminology, so they can read books written in these foreign tongues. Then we introduced also other subjects, like religious art, like ancient languages, as I mentioned for the history faculty, where we have Greek and Latin. We will also have it in the theology faculty, because it is needed, above all Greek, but also Latin, for some subjects.

Then we introduced two years of music, because we believe that the priest of tomorrow should understand something about music, which for us is also a means of educating, a means of constructing, and also of refining of the human personality. Unfortunately one would say that in our society man tends to become rather vulgar, perhaps even a bit barbarous, and not as refined as we would like man to be today.

EIR: Where do the professors come from and where do the students come from?

Habbi: This year we have had, as a first experiment, 35 professors, of whom 10 are laymen, especially in languages and music, archeology, and art, and one in philosophy too.

The others are clergy, including two bishops, one Chaldean and one Armenian. The religious people and priests are not just Chaldeans, they are of all rites and all confessions. This is a university college, so it is open to everybody. This year we have had exclusively Christian students, because we are not officially recognized, and we don't yet have a permit, but the plan we have in mind, and which we officially submitted to the government, provides that the college will be open to everyone. Already on the board of directors of the university we have four Muslims and eight Christians, and on the teaching staff of the four faculties, some 40 teachers, including no fewer than 15 Muslims. Also the students whom we



An illustration of making medicine in a Baghdad manuscript from 1224 of the Greek "Materia Medica Dioscorides." It was a group of Christian doctors who brought Greek medical science into the Baghdad of the Abbassid Caliphs—showing, Dr. Habbi points out "that culture is never the property of just one people."

will invite as soon as we get the permit from the government, will be Muslim and Christian. Perhaps only the philosophy and theology faculty will be attended by a majority of Christians, but the other three programs will certainly have a mixed student body, Christian and Muslim.

Of course we will have rules for selecting students with good averages, as well as a certain upbringing and morality, because we are not just interested in instructing them scientifically, but also in really shaping them as persons. We are trying, too, to find really excellent professors, Christian or Muslim. Since we are especially interested in having an entity for scientific and intellectual dialogue at our disposal, which we deem very important for coexistence between Christians and Muslims in the country, and throughout the region, we will naturally try to include Muslim professors and to give some importance too, to Muslim studies. Thirdly, this university institute will be open to foreign professors, in the sense that every semester we will host outside professors from all over the world. Through the direct contacts that we have with both the Oriental Institute in Rome, where I hold

a professorship, as well as with several international scientific and cultural societies, we will ask other universities to send us persons specialized in the areas we teach here, for two aims: first to find out what's in the world, the new publications, the new ideas being discussed elsewhere; second, to give to those professors the opportunity to know at close range this country, which is so rich in civilization and culture, and to know its people, because I know many professors who only know things abstractly; for me this is just one aspect of culture. One certainly becomes more intellectual and wiser through direct contact with the sites of this civilization and the people themselves. We already have a plan, the minute we get official authorization, to set up sister relationships with other universities, for example, with the Oriental Institute in Rome.

EIR: There are already other locations for promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims; why, in your view, is it important to promote this also with this new institution?

Habbi: I have always been convinced that it is ideas that move the world. It is not its might or money. No matter how much these may be important factors, the most important factor is always ideas. So by dealing with brains, you can do a lot. This is, so to speak, an innate faculty of man; because we are speaking of man and not of an animal. And human beings must be open not just on the level of the senses, on the feeling level, but also on the intellectual level. The entire human person must open himself and herself to another person in order to become truly human. This is a psychological and philosophical requirement of all human beings. Secondly, we as Christians have the special mission of showing ourselves as open to others. It is a duty for us, we must open ourselves up to others, we cannot remain closed in our sacristies. The Church teaches that every believer, every baptized person must also be an apostle. The Church is a yeast, it is a light, it is a salt. If the salt is not put on the food, what good is it? To eat salt alone—nobody does that. Our society, in Iraq as in neighboring countries, is a mixed society. Indeed, at one time Christians were more numerous in this region. Today we must admit that we are a minority. We don't like this word minority, because it has two meanings. Numerically, that's all right, we are a minority; but a minority in the sense of being second class, being inferior, certainly not.

We Iraqi Christians, like the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Lebanese, the Egyptians, etc., are natives; we originated in these countries. We did not come here from the Moon or any other country. So those who are with us in this country, even if they are Muslims, are our brothers, whether we like it or not. So we believe that one primary instrument of dialogue must be precisely the intellectual one—without discounting the role of charity.

How can we implement this dialogue today? With regard to our history, we have very solid proof of the fact that since

Islam's advent in this country and in the region, Christians and Muslims have lived together for long periods, especially at the beginning of the Muslim era, without too many problems. In fact, a good coexistence and relations of cooperation were established, especially in the cultural and intellectual domain. As evidence, I would like to cite our experience in Iraq, of Christian doctors, who came from the school of Gondisapur, in Ahwas, which is now in Iran, and they were transferred to Baghdad, in the epoch of the first Abassids, where they founded the great school of Baghdad. We could mention many names, but there are especially three important families of Christian doctors: Bahtiso, Massawayh, and Hunayn ibn Ishaq and his school. These are families of physicians and intellectuals. To give you an idea of what this means, suffice it to say that Hunayn and his school translated more than 300 volumes of Hippocrates and Galen and other Greek writings, especially science and philosophy, as well as Plato and Aristotle. Then add the books he wrote himself—the fruits of his reading of the Greek authors. His culture was to a great extent Greek, and this shows what I always say, that culture is never the property of just one people, or one country, it is the common heritage of all of humanity.

Because, if in antiquity Mesopotamia gathered the first seeds of the civilization we know today, surely it did not keep it only for itself, but it transmitted these seeds which then sprouted in other lands. And thus we had the Egyptian civilization, the Mediterranean one, then the Greek and the Roman, and then out of Greco-Roman it passed to the Arabs, the Syrians, to pass again, via these peoples, to the west, in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. So ideas are still a common heritage. And this is a reality which man must never forget. Because fanaticism is what has killed the world. We believe we can do something, beginning culturally and intellectually, to arrive at combatting religious and racial fanaticism.

What can we do today, seeing what the past was? Learning from history—because history is the great teacher of mankind—in 1972, with a group of priests and laypersons, and a few Muslim professors, we created a review called *Bein Han al Bahrain*, meaning *Mesopotamia*, which has come out four times a year since early 1973. In this scientific-cultural review we publish especially whatever concerns the Mesopotamian heritage, but in all aspects, and not from a religious standpoint as such but from a scientific and intellectual standpoint. So there is always history of ancient Mesopotamia, and then there is the literary or historical Christian and Muslim heritage. Muslims also write regularly in this review, not just Christians, and the review is recognized not only by the ministry of education and culture, but by several Iraqi universities, as a way to get a better score at the university. The review enjoys a certain circulation in various parts of the world, especially in cultural institutions, but for some years we have been unable to send copies we used to send because of the wars, first the Iran-Iraq war, then the recent Gulf War.

We first had a run of 6,000 copies, now it is only 2,500. It is quite in demand, even though economically we are always in the red, because it is a cultural magazine, which costs a lot and makes little profit.

Through this review we have seen that the intellectual class of the country started appreciating us.

I myself was named, at the end of 1972, to the Syriac Academy, and then, when Iraq's three academies, the Arab, Kurd, and Syriac, were unified, I became a member of the Iraqi Academy in 1978, as I still am today. There are about 30 of us now, people of culture, of a high scientific level, and we meet every two weeks to carry forward scientific work. I have been welcomed into more than one international society, I am constantly invited to international cultural conferences, on the history of medicine, because it is one of my specialties, or history of law, which is my actual field.

Now, with this new college we think we can do much more, because already after one year, I perceive, from the contacts I have had with some professors and intellectuals, their enthusiasm about the idea of being part of this university, of teaching, or participating in scientific courses or conferences, which we started holding last year and which we will do a lot more of this year, once we get the official permit. Last year we held about 10 open conferences. We invited figures, including Muslims, to discuss cultural and scientific themes. We have also thought about musical recitals. . . . The war kept us from continuing, and in the last five months we suspended the activities of the college, but we hope this year to be able to organize a rather dense program of conferences and scientific sessions, and we hope over time to be able to invite people from abroad, too, to do something important.

I have experience in this kind of thing. In 1973 I organized a festival-congress in honor of Saint Efraim, one of the great fathers of the Syriac-Chaldean Church, from the 4th century, and at the same time in honor of Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the famous physician. Figures from many parts of the world came to that conference, from United States, France, Germany, Belgium, England, Holland, Italy, etc. It really was a beautiful occasion, and the result was the publication of two small books and a big volume containing all the acts of the festival-congress, which came out in Arabic and also in the original languages in which the various presentations had been given.

Through this college we hope then to be able to have a review which will be the official organ and other publications. That will give us a way of publishing not just scholarly work, which is exclusively intended for teaching, but also to choose books and topics which are important and profound, and also sensitive, which cannot be treated everywhere with the same ease.

So there is no lack of plans. We just hope that the country can enjoy greater tranquility, because without peace and tranquility you can't do work, especially intellectual work.

Relief official says famine looms in Iraq

Lawrence Pezzullo, executive director of Catholic Relief Services, testified on Aug. 1 before the Select Committee on Hunger of the U.S. House of Representatives. CRS provides relief and development assistance in more than 70 Third World countries, including eight countries in the Middle East. The following are excerpts from his presentation:

CRS can confirm that the health and nutritional plight of a growing number of Iraqis is deteriorating alarmingly, and this situation is likely to be compounded by the reported failure of this year's crop.

Second, we want to emphasize the anomaly of having to spend scarce humanitarian resources in a country that would otherwise be able to provide for its people's needs; moreover, humanitarian efforts directed there could siphon off critical resources that would otherwise go to less developed countries facing major humanitarian disasters. There are currently 30 million people at risk of starvation in 16 countries in Africa. . . .

The crisis in Iraq

Iraq is on the brink of a major humanitarian crisis. Since sanctions were imposed in August 1990, commercial imports of commodities have been reduced to a trickle, and vulnerable groups are feeling the squeeze between reduced supply and rising prices. Prior to the imposition of sanctions, Iraq imported approximately 70% of its food needs, and although the government of Iraq encouraged increased food production following sanctions, the harvest that has just been gathered is reported to be only one-third of last year's record crop. And due to the lack of seeds for planting, fertilizer, and spare parts to run essential farm machinery, next year's harvest predictions are even grimmer.

Food imports to Iraq cost nearly \$3 billion when food production is normal. Taking into account that it might be difficult to reach this level of food intake under current conditions, and using a standard ration computed for a disaster-stricken population, Iraq's food import bill for 1991-92 could be reduced to \$1.6 billion.

In the meantime, the amount of food entering Iraq under the auspices of the United Nations and international agencies such as CRS falls well short of the level of imports prior to