

THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

ECHOES OF A CHRISTIAN SYMBOL

Photo reverberates with raw power of Christ on cross

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Most of the furor over the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq has centered on the pornographic pictures. The disgust and horror registered by President Bush and by most Americans is mainly produced by the graphic scenes of simulated sex; stacks of naked, hooded bodies; a naked man smeared from head to toe with excrement, forced to pose for a grinning American guard.

But the role of dominant icon has been reserved for a much quieter and more modest image--the figure of a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his outstretched hands.

Why has this image become the icon of the moment and possibly a historical marker? It's what we used to call a "Christ figure," evoking a long history of images that unite figures of torture and sacredness or divinity.

This is not the crucified or resurrected Christ, but a figure from the Passion plays, the staging of the humiliation and torture of Jesus.

Just recall the innumerable images in paintings and film, from Fra Angelico to Mel Gibson, of the mocked, blindfolded Jesus beaten and spat upon by the Jews; or the tortured king atop his pedestal, crowned with thorns by soldiers instructed to "soften him up" by the Roman governor; or finally (and most precisely) the outspread gesture of the man of sorrows, the nail holes in the wounded hands replaced in this instance by wires.

The gesture--arms spread at 4 and 8 o'clock--can signify a number of things: vulnerability, acceptance, supplication, welcome, even forgiveness. Most striking, however, is the sense of poise and equilibrium it suggests, if only for the moment of the photograph.

Put yourself in this man's place, and it's hard to imagine staying on top of that box very long. Stifled by a hood that blinds and smothers, threatened with electrocution if you fall from the pedestal, the natural reaction would be anxiety and panic. Whatever else the outstretched gesture means, then, it is the natural result of a man's attempt to maintain his balance in a difficult situation.

So it is not disgust, but something like admiration and sympathy that is evoked by this image.

The stillness, the equilibrium of the man on the box have to remind us of devotional images of Christ keeping his cool under stress, forgiving his tormentors, remaining serene and dignified despite his humiliation.

We do not know yet the identity of the Iraqi who endured this torture. ("Abuse" is a euphemism that, like "collateral damage," is becoming increasingly hard to pronounce with a straight face.) Perhaps he was a criminal, a terrorist, an insurgent, a foreign fighter or just a random individual who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, an "innocent victim" whose innocence fits perfectly with the iconic tableau into which he has been inserted.

Perhaps this sort of torture was practiced on numerous individuals (as was crucifixion) and this just happens to be the photograph of a common practice at Abu Ghraib that made its way onto the Internet. Whatever the truth about the person under the hood, his image has become the globally circulated icon of the war in Iraq.

It has been transmitted to every corner of the world; it has been reproduced in innumerable protest posters and artworks from Baghdad to Berkeley.

Originally designed as part of the war on terrorism, photographs were taken, not just to document the torture but to enhance the shaming of victims by exposing their torment to the camera. This photo has become a weapon in the hands of those who oppose that war.

It is now among the principal recruiting tools for Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups. The Abu Ghraib photographs, this one above all, have dealt a blow to the United States' mission in Iraq more deadly than any of those imaginary weapons of mass destruction attributed to Saddam Hussein.

But the photograph is more than a weapon to be mustered for one side or another in the ideological battles of the moment. It is also a powerful teaching device, a devotional image worthy of prolonged attention for what it tells us about this war, and its relation to morality, religion and sacrifice.

It is an uncanny revelation of the religious fantasies that haunt the war on terrorism, which is (despite the disavowals) a Holy War against Evil, a Crusade to liberate the Holy (or is it Oily) Land of the Middle East for Western Christian Free Market Democracy. It was only a matter of time before these fantasies produced an incarnate image of a real victim for us.

How did we become the Roman occupiers of the Middle East? How did we become the crucifiers of Christ? It will take contemplation of this image, and many other things besides, to figure all this out.

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