



A Yezidi Iraqi throws a cloth at jars of oil in order to make a wish at a temple in Lalish.  
Photograph: Safin Hamed/AFP

## **Massacre of the Intolerants**

On August 14, 2007 the suicide bombing of a Yezidi village in Sinjar, a town in the northern province of Nineveh, Iraq, killed more than 250 men, women and children. Entire families were murdered, their homes flattened. A few months before, 21 Yezidi workers in Mosul were pulled off a bus and shot to death. These killings were reportedly prompted by the stoning death of a young Yezidi woman by her own people, after she converted to Islam in order to marry a Muslim man. While Yezidi leaders condemned the stoning, it was too late to subdue the negative attention that had been drawn.

Yezidi people are ethnically Kurdish, and have substantial communities in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Their faith practices reflect influences from several different religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and also Islam (as seen in their reverence of the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi mystic Adi Musafir.) A perception about the religion, which has been blamed for many attacks of Yezidi people over the years, is that they worship the Devil. This notion appears to come from their reverence of Lucifer (represented in their religious symbolism by a peacock), not as a fallen angel, but as an angel still in God's good graces, having long ago been forgiven his past transgressions.

Following the latest attacks, the Iraqi Yezidi are living in great fear. According to a September 14, 2007 article in Minority Rights Groups International on-line, Ali Seedo Rasho, President of the Yezidi Cultural Association in Iraq said, "These are already very poor people but now they can't farm, they are afraid to leave their homes to sell their produce because they will be targeted. It is like they are in jail."

According to Patrick Cockburn, a reporter in Baghdad writing online at *The Independent*, the initial killing of the young woman for converting to Islam was extremely brutal. Doaa Aswad Dekhil, a 17 year old girl from the town of Bashika in the northern province of Nineveh, returned to her town, upon being promised forgiveness by her family for her conversion and elopement, only to be met by a mob of about 2,000, led by her family. They beat her to death, apparently with police watching. The attack was reportedly caught on video and made available on-line.

So what followed the stoning of Doaa Aswad Dekhil was intolerance multiplied: intolerance of one religion's intolerance of the other. And while the next story is not necessarily one of religious-based violence, it demonstrates the human ability to choose forgiveness over vengeance, strength over victimhood.

On October 2, 2006 a depressed and deranged young man walked into an Amish school building in Pennsylvania Dutch farm country, tied up ten young Amish girls and fatally shot five of them, before turning the gun on himself.

For the families of the dead and a community in shock, the events of that day should have prompted a numbness and anger impossible to escape. But at the end of that day, the women from the Amish community went and sat with the widow of the perpetrator. They understood that she, too, was grieving, and the grief needed to be shared. At the funeral for the perpetrator, over 70 members of the Amish community attended, and since that time over four million dollars has been collected and set aside not just for the Amish victims, but for the children of the man who pulled the trigger.

This was a redemptive moment, in a day that certainly needed one. It was an act of great moral courage, demonstrating clearly a conviction and a commitment to the sacredness of all life. A community that chose not to be another victim incarnated its faith into an unforgettable action. With that action, the concept of pardon took on new meaning, demanding new language be used to express it. This is the language of redemption.

How many of us would be able to do what this Amish community did? Where in the collective psyche of a community does mercy begin to take hold as a preferred response over vengeance? How is intolerance reversed?

In his commencement speech at DePaul University in June of 1997, Elie Wiesel stated, *"What is the opposite of intolerance? Not tolerance. Tolerance is a word that has a condescending tone. 'I tolerate you.' The opposite of intolerance is respect. We must respect one another, not in spite of our differences, but because of our differences. I must respect the Christian for whatever he or she is, the Muslim for whatever he or she is, the agnostic for whatever he or she is. And I expect the same respect for me."* (Humanity.org) Mr. Wiesel is a Holocaust survivor.