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Sacred Souls, Bare Lives

Accompanying Mario Rizzi's powerful pictures of the Yazidi refugee camps and their inhabitants are some deeply troubling words about what the monstrous creatures who call themselves »Islamic State« (or else Daesh, ISIS, ISIL) have done to this weak and vulnerable community.

The Yazidis are the living testimonies of the sacred certitude of the most ancient convictions. From Zoroastrianism to Islam, the most ancient traces of multiple religions have come down to define the most vulnerable in a community of convictions and certitude that today are as real as a child falling asleep on her mother's lap and being sung a lullaby in Kurmanji Kurdish. As a community, the Yazidis are small, ancient, fragile, and archaic remnants of distant sacred memories now forever lost in the dominant institutions of one religion or another.

Daesh, meanwhile, is a very post/modern plague. As a polycephalous organism, ISIS has multiple parentages. The US-led invasion of Iraq, Assad's slaughter of Syrian people, US and its Arab allies arming the Syrian opposition. The list is limited but ignominious. The result, however, is specifically a post/modern brand of barbarity with an Islamic signature on it.

What the subterranean creatures that call themselves »Islamic State« have done to the Yazidis in places like Sinjar in Iraqi Kurdistan, the systematic slaughter of men, women, and children, or the enslavement of young women, is first and foremost one of the darkest chapters and ugliest episodes in modern Islamic history. ISIS is indiscriminate in their barbarities: Sunnis or Shi'a Muslims, Yazidis and Christians are the same for them—the erasure of their humanity and their transmutation into mere bare lives, sacrificial lambs on the predatory edges of colonial modernity.

Over the years Mario Rizzi has emerged as a visual chronicler of hope and despair, tears and terrors, fears and trembling of our humanity in the sprawling refugee camps that have become definitive to the very texture of our brutalized urbanity. His photography of the Yazidi camp for the internally displaced people in Iraqi Kurdistan caps a career in documenting human suffering beyond words. He captures truths with his camera we cannot reach with our words. But can we look his picture with impunity?

ISIS has reached deep into the darkest layers of our shared and shattered humanity with a specifically Islamic signature and yet brandishes the most advanced weaponry that the US and its European and regional allies produce and procure in their free markets of advancing death and destruction. Without their US-EU, Russian, or Chinese-made weaponry, the ISIS will be reduced to a gang of criminal thugs, that they are, without much power of death and destruction at their disposal. The deadly fusion of archaic barbarity and postmodern weaponry has made Daesh possible.

Reports are frightening. »Islamic State fighters«, we read, »are committing genocide against Yazidis in Syria and Iraq by seeking to destroy the group through murder, sexual slavery, gang rape, torture and humiliation, UN investigators have said« (Wintour 2016). The barbarity of the ISIS deeds are beyond words:

The UN report, based on interviews with dozens of survivors, said on Thursday that the Islamist militants, who include foreign fighters, had been systematically capturing Yazidis in Iraq and Syria since August 2014, seeking to »erase their identity«. »You will stay here until you die: one woman's rescue from ISIS. The UN report said Isis had tried to erase the Yazidis' identity by forcing men to choose between conversion to Islam and death, raping girls as young as nine, selling women at slave markets, and drafting boys to fight. The report said Isis had begun holding online slave auctions with an encrypted application to circulate photos of captured Yazidi women and girls. One woman told investigators she had been sold 15 times, saying she could hardly recall all the ISIS fighters

who had claimed to have bought her. Investigators gathered evidence that showed ISIS separated Yazidi men and boys over 12 from the rest of their families, and killed those who refused to convert. Women and children often witnessed these killings before being forcibly transferred to locations in Iraq, and from there to Syria, where the majority of captives remain (Wintour 2016).

How can we read these words and then look at Mario Rizzi's pictures? Is there a scale to human barbarity—any historical reference? Where does the German and other European atrocities against European Jewry, or the slaughter of Native Americans on their own land by European settler colonialists, measure up and meet the atrocities of the ISIS perpetrated against the very fabric of our humanity in Sinjar? What, if anything, can we learn from transhistorical scales of atrocities done by one against another group of human beings? What do Mario Rizzi's pictures offer us that we do not have about other atrocities?

»The Spaniards forced their way into Native settlements«, we read in Bartolomé de Las Casas's eyewitness account *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542) and wonder what links the Muslim Daesh today to their Christian predecessors centuries earlier?

Slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting: »Wriggle, you little perisher.« They slaughtered

anyone and everyone in their path, on occasion running through a mother and her baby with a single thrust of their swords. They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honor of our Savior and the twelve Apostles, or tie dry straw to their bodies and set fire to it. Some they chose to keep alive and simply cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: »Take this letter«—meaning that their sorry condition would act as a warning to those hiding in the hills. The way they normally dealt with the native leaders and nobles was to tie them to a kind of griddle consisting of sticks resting on pitchforks driven into the ground and then grill them over a slow fire, with the result that they howled in agony and despair as they died a lingering death (Bartolomé de Las Casas 1992: 15).

What holds those sixteenth century Christians connected to these twenty-first century Muslims? »All those who could do so took to the hills and mountains in order to escape the clutches of these merciless and inhuman butchers, these mortal enemies of human kind trained hunting dogs to track them down. Wild dogs who would savage a Native to death as soon as look at him, tearing him to shreds and devouring his flesh as though we were a pig« (Ibid: 16-17). No, we are not reading about the Daesh in Sinjar against the Yazidis but about Spaniard Christians soon after they landed in Americas. But they do sound the same. »Indeed they invented so many new methods of murder« Bartolomé de Las Casas tells us »that it would be quite impossible to set them all down on paper« (Ibid: 23).

Bartolomé de Las Casas speaks in first person pronoun: »During the three or four months I was there, more than seven thousand children died of hunger after their parents had been shipped off to the mines« (Ibid: 30). Why would they do such things? Were they anticipating their kindred souls amongst the Daesh? »A Spaniard,« again Bartolomé de Las Casas reports, »who was out hunting deer or rabbits realized that his dogs were hungry and not

finding anything they could hunt, took a little boy from his mother, cut his arms and legs into chunks with his knife and distributed them among his dogs« (Ibid: 74). The numbers that De Las Casas gives are staggering: »During these eleven years, more than two million souls have perished and, in an area of more than a hundred leagues by a hundred leagues, only two thousand survivors are to be seen, and even this number is shrinking day by day as the survivors succumb to the rigours of a life of slavery« (Ibid: 56).

The sight of the naked life of a Yazidi girl today, or a Native American child then, and the broken bones of a Palestinian child crushed by the bombs Barack Obama has given to Israel is the singular site of the savagery that has forever scarred the very notion of the sacred. All other religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—find their measure of truth or falsehood from that ruinous site. Mario Rizzi's photography is the paradoxical evidence of that site, you cannot ignore his pictures and yet you cannot look at them either, held as they are against the shameful gaze of any Muslim, Christian, or Jew with a question they will ignore at their own perils. How can a Muslim face his or her God praying after these pictures? How could a Jew, a Christian, a Hindu, an Anything?

There was no photography, and no artist of Mario Rizzi's sensitivities around to take any picture of those atrocities committed by Christians against Native Americans, though there are illustrations that were later added to Bartolomé de Las Casas's description for any visual aid people might have needed imagining what those Spaniards did upon landing in the Americas. There are plenty of photographs of the death and destructions Israelis have perpetrated upon Palestinians generation after generation. But it is the singular task of the Zionist propaganda machinery to doubt and dismiss those pictures, as either self-inflicted or else collateral to the cause of stealing Palestine.

Such facts raise a crucial question about the task of arts and artists like Mario Rizzi in the visual recording of the atrocities of our time. There is no visual evidence of what those masses of millions of African slaves suffered as they were shipped to the United States, though the enduring legacy of it has given birth to

generations of artists, novelists, poets and scholars documenting them. There is, of course, plenty visual evidence of the Nazi atrocities during the Jewish Holocaust, and there are museums built to commemorate them, but all of them pale in comparison to the enormity of the terror masses of millions of the European Jews suffered and endured. The same holds true about the Armenian genocide, or the genocide of Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

I remember when the snap shots of the atrocities of the US soldiers in Abu Ghraib surfaced and soon after it Fernando Botero began a series of paintings based on them I thought that artistic rendition of such grotesque atrocities by Americans in Iraq was too early, that we needed to wait for a while, unable to digest what we had seen, to leave those snap shots at the level of semiotic blindness. The same is how I feel about Mario Rizzi's photographs. They are too blunt however gentle, too soon however timely, too immediate however distant, too direct however shot with his characteristic gentility. I find myself turning away my eyes from those direct gazes, though they invite you inward.

The faces of these brutalized bodies Mario Rizzi captures are not simply inscrutable as Emmanuel Levinas might say. They are too blunt in their tacit condemnations to tolerate. These faces demand attention but from whom, from Mario Rizzi when he was photographing them, from the spectators who might go to see his exhibition? Then what? These faces conceal far more than they reveal. The terror those faces have witnessed has now receded deeply into the inner sanctums of their troubled memories. What are we to do with these surfaces of a depth of trouble we cannot even fathom?

Not to photograph these faces is to deny them. To photograph them is to document a shame that dismantles the very idea of being human. It is in face of that paradox that we are all turned into fragments of all lost sacred certitudes—into Yazidis: sacred souls barely hiding behind bared bodies.

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References

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