Baghdad College:  
A Beacon of Light

Al-Noor Staff
Baghdad! City of Haroun er-Rashid. The Caliphs. The Arabian Nights. Exotic rhythms of the ‘oud. Whiffs of heady spices. Erotic belly-dancers. A city with twelve centuries of history in a country whose roots go back for millennia. And how did it impress us on arrival? Like nothing of the above. Heat. Dust. Noise. Confusion. And we ourselves were worn out, covered in desert dust, tired and cranky after the long trip. At the Nairn bus station we were met by a big yellow school bus marked ‘Baghdad College’, and we piled in for the last stage of our journey. As we turned in to the compound where we would spend the next three years, we were swamped by all the Jesuit Fathers and scholastics who had been awaiting our arrival, almost fifty of them. Greetings. Welcomes. Reunions. Handshakes and hugs. We made it. We are here. Baghdad College at last!” So reads a passage in the memoirs of Father
Si Smith, S.J., a Jesuit who taught at Baghdad College. For over thirty-five years, the Jesuit-run school served as a model of education and religious diversity.

American Jesuits founded Baghdad College in 1932. “The Jesuits’ Baghdad ‘mission’ was quite unlike any other,” noted Smith. “It was not a mission to proselytize and convert Muslims or anyone at all. We were there to educate Iraqi youth. We did just that and did it very well.” “BC on the Tigris” quickly flourished, attracting Christian and Muslim students alike. 145 Jesuits served at the institution, five of whom are buried on its grounds. With the motto, “An Iraqi school for Iraqi boys,” Baghdad College educated young men from all across the country, producing authors, diplomats, and politicians. Students include former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, former Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi, and famed academic Kanan Makiya.1

In addition to its academic credentials, Baghdad College was also a place of tremendous religious diversity. Despite its Jesuit affiliation and the fact that the school was originally founded to educate Christian boys, proselytization was strictly forbidden, and efforts were made to balance the population of Christians and Muslims. Father Smith commented upon the diversity of religions, exclaiming, “There were Chaldeans and Armenians, Greeks and Syrians, Nestorians and Jacobites, Copts and Maronites...Later, I would find out about even more distant cousins: Yezidis and Mandaeans and Zoroastrians, without ever touching divisions within Islam, such as Sunni, Shi’a, Sufi, Wahhabi, Alawite, and Druze!” The success of this blend of cultures and religions was made possible by the attitude, as Father Solomon Sara put it, “that everybody is Iraqi, that everybody is on an equal basis.”2

However, despite their successes, the Jesuits’ efforts in Baghdad came to an abrupt end in 1968. The Ba’athist coup led to the nationalization of Baghdad College and the expulsion of the Jesuits from Iraq. Today, while it lacks its Jesuit affiliation, Baghdad College remains one of Iraq’s leading academic institutions and continues to educate Iraqi boys. To further illuminate the efforts of the Jesuits at Baghdad College, its diverse community, and its long-term impacts, Al-Noor interviewed seven Jesuits who served at the school.
How long were you at Baghdad College, and what was your role there?

Father Al Hicks: I left for Iraq on a ship called Excalibur from Hoboken, New Jersey in late August 1960. I saluted the Statue of Liberty, not to return for three years. I was a Jesuit Scholastic about to begin regency, twenty-four years old and ready to get something done. We landed in Beirut twenty-one days later, after a cargo stop in Alexandria, and were met at the dock by fellow Jesuits. The next day we boarded a Nairn bus for the night trip across the desert to Baghdad. We greeted the rising sun in Baghdad with the wonder of it all. My role the first year at Baghdad College was as the homeroom teacher responsible for English, math, and religion for thirty boys in classrooms 1G and 1H. I had no training as a teacher and no real Arabic, and the kids understood little English. It worked out fine. My following two years I studied Arabic full time with mixed success.

Father John Donohue: I first went to Baghdad in 1953 for three years (the period of training known as "regency"). I taught sections of English and algebra for a year. [The Baghdad education system consisted of six years of primary and five years of secondary school.] The following two years, I was assigned to study Arabic full time in our own language school in Baghdad. The custom at that time was that Jesuit scholastics who were interested in returning to Baghdad after ordination spent two years studying Arabic so they would be more integrated when they returned. Arabic is not an easy language to learn. All of us who opted for it struggled, but the rewards of getting into another culture are great.

After three years I came back to Weston, Massachusetts for my theology studies. I resolved to read Arabic every day for an hour, and I kept to it fairly well. This turned out to be useful, since I was advised to go study for a doctorate in Arabic towards the end of my theology studies. Why? Because Fr. Richard McCarthy, a formidable Arabist, had a project to open an Oriental Institute at our al-Hikma University in Baghdad. In fact, the building for the Institute was already under construction before I arrived back in Baghdad after five years at Harvard to get my PhD in Medieval Arabic History.

I arrived back in 1966. In 1967, the Six-Day War changed our situation in Baghdad. We were Americans, and the U.S. had supported Israel. Our demise came slowly. A faction of the Ba’ath Party that was not in power magnified some troubles that centered on a few Jewish students at al-Hikma University. This provoked the volatile Minister of the Interior, who sent us on our way. The first wave to leave was from al-Hikma University in 1968, and the second left Baghdad College in 1969.

Father Clarence Burby: I was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1935. My father was of Anglo-Indian descent, and my mother was of mixed parentage (her father was an Armenian born in Turkey, and her mother was a Chaldean from northern Iraq). My parents got married in Baghdad. At home, we spoke English, and I speak both English and Arabic. I was a student at Baghdad College, and I joined the New England Province of the Society of Jesus in 1954, two years after high school. Prior to being ordained a priest, I taught math and religion at Baghdad College; I was ordained a priest in Baghdad in 1967. Before our Jesuits were forced to leave Iraq in 1969, my superiors saw to it that another Iraqi Jesuit priest and I would come back to run Baghdad College. During the Iraqi government’s takeover of the school, it assigned its own administration. However, it allowed the other Iraqi Jesuit and me to continue teaching Christian religion classes at Baghdad College. After one year, my fellow Jesuit and I left for Lebanon, where I applied to work with the Middle East province of the Society of Jesus. I worked in Syria for twenty-three years and in Jordan for nineteen years.

Father Robert Farrell: I was there from 1958-1961. I taught English and worked at the boarding house with Kurdish boys from the North and other boys from the South. Third-year scholastics lived at the Jesuit residence and rang the bell in the morning to announce that it was time for everyone to shave, meditate for one hour, attend mass, and then attend school. I got to know the students well, and in my
third year, I was placed in charge of putting on the school play, which ended up being a morality play that we rewrote. We also performed the musicalization of Huckleberry Finn one year by using songs from shows on tape.

Father Robert Taft: I taught English to third, fourth, and fifth years, the three upper classes, and commercial English to those in the fifth year program, which I believe was initiated while I was teaching there. I was also head of the Senior Boarding House and lived and ate with the students. The Mission Superior at the time, Fr. Thomas Hussey, appointed me choir director of the scholastics for the Christmas services. As for extracurricular activities, I was the moderator of the Debating Club.

What was your most rewarding moment at Baghdad College?

Father Hicks: The reward for me was meeting Iraqis, students, and families. The Iraqis were studious, intent on education, and accepting of our faltering efforts with an unfailing sense of humor. I have never forgotten them.

Father Smith: I doubt that there was any single moment that was the most rewarding. Watching our youngsters graduate was a wonderful experience, and I recall being very proud of the school when King Faisal II came for an official visit in 1957.

Father Farrell: My most rewarding times were spent with students; I was with them all the time, whether in the boarding house, the schoolyard, or somewhere else. I enjoyed talking to students, listening to them, and watching them play baseball together. They were the nicest kids in the world.

What was your most challenging time at Baghdad College?

Father Hicks: We were young and without administrative responsibilities. We were at ease in Baghdad and had few challenges. We thought that those days would last forever, but we were wrong. It ended for us in 1969.

Father Donohue: Thursdays from 11 to 12 during the school year, I was assigned to keep the Muslim students quiet in the cafeteria while the Christians attended religion class. I was one scholastic taming a few hundred high school students. The cafeteria was outdoors, so any rumble upset the whole campus. For a while, the scholastic who was assigned cafeteria duty on Monday morning would regularly get sick on Sunday night.

Later on, in 1968, the challenge was to explain to authorities that they were making a mistake in throwing us out. The Minister of Education was sympathetic. He was a member of the Muslim Brothers and not a member of the Ba'ath Party.

Father Burbly: The most challenging time for me at Baghdad College was when our American Jesuits had to leave Iraq. Suddenly, everything came to an end, just when I was getting ready as an Iraqi Jesuit after my years of training for the future work of the Jesuits in Iraq. It was very frustrating, to say the least. But, thank God, because of my Iraqi background, I was able to continue serving as a Jesuit in the Middle East.

Father Smith: The language was the toughest I ever learned. I already knew Latin, ancient Greek, and French, and I would later add German and Spanish, but Arabic was by far the most challenging and complex. It is also the most beautiful language in its subtlety of expression and poetic charm.

Father Taft: Baghdad itself, fabled capital of Harun al-Rashid, city of the thousand and one nights, was a sure cure for romanticism. School began at Baghdad College in September, only to come to a sudden halt when riots over the Baghdad Pact led to the staccato chatter of machine gun fire in the streets and the closing of all schools.

In May of 1959, I returned to the U.S. after the harrowing year of turmoil and civil strife that followed the revolution of July 14, 1958. That was
the First Iraqi Revolution under the leadership of Colonel Abdul Karim Kassim, and it was the worst year of my life. The revolution unleashed a reign of terror against the ruling Hashimite dynasty, the young King Faisal II was assassinated, and his uncle, Crown Prince Ali, was torn limb from limb by rioting mobs in the streets downtown. Prime Minister Nuri Said, caught trying to escape dressed as a woman, was also summarily dispatched. At night, we went to fitful sleep to the noise of the mobs in the streets, and during the day we were subjected to show trials of arrested government officials. The officials stood in cages, suffering humiliation before a military tribunal; some of the accused were the highly educated fathers of our students. Many of the accused were summarily condemned and executed. All this eventually provoked a civil war in the North, in Kurdistan, and around Mosul, where many of our students were from.

Placing your time at Baghdad College within the larger context of your time in the Society of Jesus, how did your experiences before living in Baghdad inform your experiences once there? Similarly, how did your experiences in Baghdad inform the rest of your life’s work?

Father Hicks: As Jesuit students, we became familiar with the grand histories of Jesuits who preceded us. They seemed like giants who paddled the rivers of America or sailed to China and the Far East. It seemed quite logical that when our time came, we, too, would travel to some place we had never seen before. There we met some wonderful people. They taught us more than we taught them. They taught us the stories and tradition of Iraq. After three years, we returned to Boston in 1963 to study theology. We carried with us the love the Iraqis showed us. Trying to explain this to others, more often than not, we ended up telling Baghdad stories. There was a deep love, appreciation, and concern for the people that was too difficult for a young man to explain.

Father Smith: My pre-Baghdad experiences were no preparation at all. Baghdad was utterly new, exotic, and challenging. Living in the Jesuit community helped tremendously: one could call on elders or peers when confused, look to those who had been there for years to explain local customs, or run a new idea for class by an old Jesuit.

As for the rest of my life, the experience in Baghdad thoroughly relativized my mono-cultural American attitudes, values, etc. It made it much easier for me later in life to pass with relative ease into Latin American and African cultures and to live for several years in Amman, Jordan.

Would you attribute the successes of Baghdad College to the universality of Jesuit ideals, despite a significant part of the student population being Muslim? Can you talk about how the Jesuit Catholic identity of the College interacted with the diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds of the students?

Students walking. Credit: The Archives of the Society of Jesus of New England
Father Donohue: We were invited to Baghdad to educate Christian youth. The Chaldean Patriarch was concerned that there was no Christian education for boys, though French nuns were running schools for Iraqi girls. The Jesuits arrived in 1932, and their situation remained a bit unclear until World War II prevented the wealthier Iraqis from sending their sons abroad to England or to English schools in Egypt and Turkey. They tried Baghdad College and found it to their liking. Their decision set off a rush for Baghdad College. We never lacked recruits from that time on.

We had no special formula. We just did our work and had an exhausting but enjoyable time. We didn't make converts, but we made strong friends, as shown by the long series of alumni reunions that occurred a few years ago. Baghdad, in our time, was a fairly closed society. Visiting on feast days was a major distraction. We visited with families, sipped a lot of Iraqi tea, and became regular fixtures in Baghdad society. Muslims and Christians respect each other. Relations only degenerate when politics get the upper hand.

Father Smith: A prior factor, I would suggest, is the extraordinary thirst for knowledge of the Iraqi population. I have lived in Jordan, Egypt, and other countries, and nowhere have I encountered such an eagerness to learn or the will to sacrifice oneself to do so.

Yes, Jesuit ideals did play a role. We were all quite conscious that we were there to teach, not to proselytize. Given the nature of the population and the student body, we learned great respect for Islam by getting to know Muslim boys and their families through home visits.

Father Charles Healey: The idea of Baghdad College was to educate the whole person and make people better; many of the students benefited from that and became dedicated laymen. Sports were a big thing there, since they fit into the idea of educating the whole person (the Jesuits have always had a successful sports tradition). Sports included track, softball games between the priests and the students, and basketball. The arts were also very important. Baghdad College was important in the Iraqi system, since students had to pass government exams after secondary school. They had to take exams in
English and Arabic, with the English exams necessary for acceptance into graduate and medical schools because the British had set them up. Students were very well prepared at Baghdad College.

**Father Farrell:** The success of Baghdad College was directly caused by the wisdom of the Jesuits who were there. They knew never to approach Muslim boys about becoming Christian; some Muslim boys did become Christian, but no one ever knew about it. They taught the younger Jesuits to avoid embarrassing boys in front of others and to find boys walking around hand-in-hand a common thing.

For the Catholic boys, there were always Masses available. I almost never left campus. There were about eighteen young Jesuits around my age there, and the Jesuit community there was the best in the world at the time. Everyone worked hard, and it was a very successful mission project. Many Muslims worked at Baghdad College as well. I remember that Father Loeffler would pay poor women who lived close to the school to help with the gardening, and they would kneel down and pray in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, who they called Miriam, because of their respect for her as the mother of Jesus, whom they viewed as a great prophet.

**How do you think Baghdad College can provide insight into efforts to promote cultural and religious tolerance in the Middle East today?**

**Father Hicks:** With the kind of love first given to us, it was quite easy for us to accept all our students, whoever they were. Our only demand was for them to study and get the homework in on time. They knew they were there for education. They trusted us first as teachers and in the end as people who cared for them. There was a high level of cooperation.

**Father Burby:** I’m sorry to say that the political situation in Iraq has changed very much for the worse since the late sixties. Iraq, since then, has become very unstable. Iraqi citizens have, for the most part, lost their common identity, especially religiously. Many of our Baghdad College students and graduates had to leave the country. I hope and pray that some of them can return and help build a more stable and united Iraq.

**Father Healey:** Baghdad College worked, but there was a real sadness among the Jesuits when it came to an end. Nevertheless, there was a sense that real good was done. Though the College closed, the idea didn’t
disappear.

**Father Farrell:** Saddam Hussein’s ambassador to the United States and, later, his ambassador to the United Nations, Nazir Hamdoon, was a graduate of Baghdad College and a former student of mine; he was a gloomy boy, but he was always on television defending Baghdad. The College provided the world with a lot of intellectually gifted doctors, engineers, and professors. I never thought of students as Muslims or Christians in class; they were just the kids. In 1960, two Muslim brothers who I had in class invited me to the feast of Eid at their home; this just showed how students went out of their way to show us the love and respect we tried to give them. It was a loving place; truly, it was an oasis in the desert.

**Would you like to share any other anecdotes or reflections on your time at Baghdad College?**

**Father Healey:** In the boarding house, we used to wake up at 5 a.m. for prayer, mass, breakfast, and the start of the school day at 7:30 or 8:00. Once May arrived, it became very hot, and we started on a schedule that lasted for two months, when school started at 6:30 and ended at noontime. The students who lived at the boarding house would sleep up on the roof because the house would heat up, but at night, the roofs would cool down and students would bring mosquito nets up there to sleep.

I was in charge of the juniors, or the equivalent of seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. As the prefect, I would have to go up to the roof and make sure there was no horsing around until they went to sleep at 9:30 p.m. I would then get up in the morning to wake them up, and they would ask me if I ever slept! We would get together with al-Hikma University from time to time, which started up in 1956. We would hold cookouts together, which were very nice. I also remember a young priest, Father Loeffler, who was a good gardener and in charge of the groundskeepers. He made the campus beautiful and really made it bloom in a desert climate.

**Father Burby:** When I reflect on my years at Baghdad College and our Jesuit work there, I feel that it was a rich and wonderful dream that cannot be forgotten and that could become a reality in the future, through God’s grace and people of good will.

**Father Hicks:** There were no hidden agendas. We were there to educate, and that’s what we did. They were there to study, and that’s what they did. At Baghdad College there was a palpable sense of trust. If you are honest, loving, and trusting, things tend to turn out well. Baghdad College and al-Hikma University were great works. They lasted from 1932 until 1969. However, the end of one time is always the beginning of another. I hope that there will be a new beginning in Baghdad in the future. That’s what life is about: growth, flowering, death and regrowth. One day, inshallah, the Jesuits will return to Baghdad.
ENDNOTES


2 Ibid.