

William Dalrymple, *From The Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997) 483 pp. Cloth \$30.00, Paperback \$16.95

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In 1989, William Dalrymple, a twenty-two year old graduate of Cambridge University, set off on a long and arduous journey, following in the footsteps of Marco Polo. His trek began in Jerusalem and it would end in eastern China, site of the ancient capital of the Mongols. He recounted that adventure in *In Xanadu*, a book which achieved instant success. This time, he has taken another route, following in the footsteps of John Moscos, a Byzantine monk and author of *The Spiritual Meadow*, who visited the eastern Christian world in 578 A.D.

The sites visited by Moscos and Dalrymple one in the early and rising era of Christianity and the other in modern times -- are worlds apart. While Moscos witnessed the bustling Christian communities, churches and monasteries, William Dalrymple sees decaying, abandoned buildings, and persecuted, frightened Christian communities. The once flourishing Christianity in the Byzantine age now barely survives, and soon it will disappear. At present, fourteen million Christians are scattered amid one hundred eighty million non-Christians; and most of the latter are determined to obliterate the former in the very birthplace of their religion.

At one time, Istanbul (ancient Constantinople), Antioch (present-day Antakia) and Alexandria were the three main centers of Christianity. Today, populous Istanbul includes only a small Armenian community, and an even smaller Greek one. The once prosperous Greek district of Phenar is now a filthy slum inhabited by squatters from Anatolia. During his visit to the Orthodox Patriarchate church -- the "Vatican" of World Orthodoxy -- Sunday services were cancelled for lack of attendance.

In what was known formerly as the Byzantine East, Christians have suffered the most in Eastern Turkey. The genocides of 1895 and 1915 were indelible blows, not only to the Armenians but also to the Aramean-speaking Suriani Christians. Many of the ancient churches, cathedrals, schools, and cemeteries were looted, destroyed and converted into mosques, granaries, storage depots or barns. A photograph taken near the eastern Anatolian city of Kars at the beginning of this century revealed the existence of five well-preserved Armenian churches. What remains today is one church, along with several piles of rubble. This is thanks to the Turkish authorities, and their determined effort to eradicate any vestiges of Armenian history in Turkey. Such senseless policy has already hurt the tourist industry, something Turkey will no doubt regret in the future.

Urfa (ancient Edessa-Urhe), once a vibrant scholastic and ecclesiastic center of Eastern Christianity, is now a Moslem-Kurdish city with scant surviving trace of its glorious Christian past. The city of Diyarbakir had an Armenian population

totaling 570,000 prior to the 1915 massacres; today, it is just another Kurdish town, and no Armenians are left. The same dramatic change has taken place in other cities, such as Mardin, Nisibis, Bitlis, Harput, and Van.

The armed conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdish PKK has brought renewed terror to the already-eviscerated Surianis in Eastern Turkey. The emergence of Hezbollah, an always feisty and belligerent anti-Christian band, is yet another threat. The Suriani population, numbering 200,000 at the beginning of the 20th century, has dwindled to 900 today. The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Deir-el-Zafran monasteries have only a few aging monks or nuns acting as care takers. This is sad, since the Monastery of Mar Gabriel in nearby Midyat is the oldest functioning church in the world. It was in these places that important contributions to Christianity, such as the Gregorian chant and bible illumination, originated.

It is in Syria, thanks to the Alawites and the recently deceased Hafez al-Assad, that the Christians have enjoyed a freedom not experienced in any other Moslem state. Alawites, being a religious minority and considered heretics by other Moslems, seem to empathize with the Christians. It was in Syria that the present author was able to visit the many well-preserved historical sites, churches and monasteries mentioned by Moscos, without being run over by tourists.

In Lebanon, the intransigence of the Christian Phalangist militias probably prevented the Maronites from establishing a Christian state. The cruelty and arrogance of the Phalangists led to their defeat in the civil war, prompting many Maronites to flee the country and further weakening their status in the homeland.

Israel has historically benefited from the financial and political support of the Christians. The American taxpayers have and continue to contribute billions of dollars a year for its survival. Yet the rulers of Israel and the Orthodox zealots, the *heredim*, seem determined to discard all remnants of Christianity from Israel and to retain only a bare minimum number of churches, museums and monuments to attract tourist dollars. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been quoted as saying that if this trend continues, Israel will turn into a Christian theme park. The Israelis seem to use all in their power to rid themselves of the remaining Christian Palestinians and Armenians in the Old City. The Christian Palestinians suffer the most. On the one hand, the Israelis consider them Arabs and not trustworthy, while the Arabs mistrust them for being Christians, therefore pro-Jewish.

The fate of the Christians is also deplorable in Egypt. Alexandria, the "Queen of the Mediterranean" was once heavily populated by Christians and Jews. Now only a handful of aging Greeks live there. Dalrymple provides a vivid account of the many atrocities (including killings, robbings, and beatings) perpetrated on the Copts by the members of the Islamic Brotherhood. Such hideous behavior is ignored by the officials so as not to offend the radicals, who are gaining more influence as time passes.

The final chapter of the book deals with the monks and monastic life in Upper Egypt, where asceticism and monasticism originated. The author spent

some time in the historic St. Anthony's Monastery and he offers a vivid description of his experience.

This book is a well-written, scholarly review of the history and present state of Christianity in the Middle East. Christians in Western countries tolerate and treat the Moslems in their midst with civility and respect. This practice, however, does not seem to translate well in the Moslem societies who consider themselves and Islam superior to all others. Non-Moslems are viewed merely as subalterns waiting to be converted to the true religion.

This reviewer can point to a few shortcomings in the book. For one, the author failed to visit the Assyrians (whom he calls Nestorian refugees) in Jezira in northeastern Syria. An important episode of the Assyrian diaspora is thus not covered in the narrative. He also failed to visit Ma'alula, the small town close to Damascus where Aramaic is still spoken. Further, while he met with the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt when visiting Lebanon, the author writes nothing about the Druze.

There were very few minor glitches. For example, Merv is in Turkmenistan and not in Uzbekistan. The ruins of Jundishapur are about 400 kilometers distance from Tehran and not close to it.

Overall, this is a remarkable book. The non-specialist will learn a lot about the early history of Christianity, the monastic life, the stylites, the desert fathers, and Christianity's contribution to Islam and to European thought. The present day politics and social upheavals of the Middle East are also well-covered.

What makes this author different is the genuine empathy he shows towards his suffering co-religionists; something other Western travelers have not always communicated. Christianity is now at the nadir of its existence in the Middle East. In the future this book will be a good reference about its demise. It can be said that William Dalrymple has written an eloquent obituary of Christianity in the Middle East.