

From the Holy Mountain, by William Dalrymple

reviewed by [Donald E. Wagner](#) in the [March 22, 2000](#) issue

William Dalrymple is a gifted travel writer who skillfully draws on church history, theology, Middle East politics and comparative religions to tell the story of Middle East Christians. His journey begins on Greece's Mt. Athos ("the holy mountain") and follows the route taken by the monk John Moschos in 587 CE, a time when Middle Eastern Christianity was at its peak. Moschos's book *The Spiritual Meadow*--which Dalrymple calls "the most rich and detailed portrait that survives of the Byzantine Levant immediately before the advent of Islam"--provides a counternarrative.

Dalrymple's easy style and appropriately cynical humor soften his depressing account of the erosion of Christianity in lands where it once flourished. His book is essential for those who visit Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, the Holy Land or Egypt on one of the many "footsteps of St. Paul" or "land of the Bible" trips. The myriad personalities and experiences Dalrymple encounters reveal the pressures facing Middle Eastern Christians.

One such telling encounter is at a Byzantine church in Istanbul. Seeing the door open he enters, but is told he can't go into the sanctuary.

"Why? It looks open," he responds.

"I'm afraid you need a special pass for security reasons," he is told.

"Security? Why?" he asks.

"There are VIPs inside," comes the reply.

"Politicians?"

"No, models. Today they are having a beauty contest here."

The dark, gloomy church is the worst possible place to hold such an event, but the "Turks will go to any length to annoy their hereditary enemies." Such political games go on between Turkey and Greece, with the Orthodox Church and its Istanbul-based leader, the ecumenical patriarch, caught in the tug of war. Christians move out of

the country as fast as possible and Christian churches become museums for Turkey's growing tourist trade.

Dalrymple offers a sympathetic treatment of the Nestorian churches in eastern Turkey and Syria (the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East), and a sensitive account of the philosophical and political issues that caused the fifth-century divide. My Western theological education had dismissed Nestorianism as a nasty heretical movement in the battle for "pure doctrine," but I was never told about the political manipulation of the Byzantine emperor and bishops at the Council of Chalcedon, nor that the church the council excommunicated was the largest and greatest missionary church of the first 1,000 years of Christian history. Today these Christians are a dwindling minority caught in the crossfire between Turkish military forces and Kurdish resistance fighters. Again, a few boarded-up churches and monasteries will remain as museums of a bygone era.

Dalrymple's section on Lebanon draws out the many complications of that small nation's bloody history. He emphasizes the miscalculations of the Christian and Muslim militias that devastated the once beautiful country during nearly 20 years of civil war. Dalrymple states that the Maronite Christians "reaped a bitter harvest of their own sowing for failing to compromise with the Muslim majority," a failure that had more to do with politics and economics than with religion. He might have said more about Syrian, Israeli, Iranian, Iraqi and U.S. involvement with the different warring factions, though he gives a remarkably accurate portrayal.

While negotiating these political, religious and historical issues, Dalrymple maintains the style of a travel journalist. His vivid descriptions enable one almost to smell the kebabs sold in Cairo's street, or join the Syrian Muslims and Christians who come to be blessed by "holy water" heated in the skull of a Christian saint--a blessing that promises the gift of progeny. Stories punctuate the book. Typical is the one about the popular Armenian caterer in Jerusalem's Old City who was known for the liver pate and hors d'oeuvres he prepared for weddings--until people discovered that the cat population was decimated at the time of his catered events.

Besides being entertaining, Dalrymple's book courageously tackles serious concerns. The Turkish, Israeli and Egyptian governments come in for major criticism, particularly as Dalrymple allows local Christians to describe their experiences. The blame for the Armenian genocide and the contemporary erosion of Assyrian and Syrian Orthodox communities (and their monasteries and churches) is laid at the

doorstep of the Ankara regime. In Anatolia (eastern Turkey), 210 Armenian monasteries, 700 monastic churches, 1,639 parish churches and 2,549 ecclesial buildings have vanished since late Ottoman years. The Ottoman governor, Resid Bey, is said to have killed 570,000 Armenian and Syrian Christians in two provinces alone during the 1890s--more people than have been killed in Kosovo. Today the Turkish government prevents scholars from working in the fields of Armenian archaeology and demographics. Turkey has close military and economic relations with the U.S. and Israel. Dalrymple is, however, careful to distinguish Islam as a religion from governments or political movements that act contrary to Islamic principles.

Dalrymple is not restrained in his discussion of Israel, which is still somewhat immune to criticism in the West. He writes about how the government maneuvers to protect the tiniest artifacts of Jewish history, while entire Christian and Muslim towns, churches and holy sites are bulldozed. We also hear about the Palestinian Christian dislike for the Greek-dominated church because its patriarch has a long history of selling vast amounts of property to the Israeli government at bargain rates. The Knesset, the Israeli parliament, is built on land leased from the church for \$1 per year. When monasteries die out, the patriarch sells the property cheaply to pay his bills.

The journey ends in Egypt, which was also Moschos's final destination. Perhaps 10 million of the Middle East's Christians live here--Christians who feel the effects of a discrimination that sometimes approaches persecution. Dalrymple provides excellent historical background on the Coptic Orthodox, who have given the world monasticism and a rich theological and liturgical legacy. The Coptic Church is undergoing significant renewal, as churches often do during times of religious persecution.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism has made life more difficult in Upper Egypt, where the majority of Christians live. But there is no single Coptic view on the problems. Some Christians speak directly about the threat from militant Islamic nationalists, while others repeat the governmental line, given to Dalrymple by President Hosni Mubarak himself: "There is no persecution here--you can go anywhere and see for yourself." Coptic layman Butros Gabra claims that "the government always knew who the [militant Islamic nationalists] were, [but] as long as they just shot up a few Copts they were happy to tolerate them. Only when they started attacking foreigners and threatening tourism did the government take the

necessary steps."

Anti-Christian discrimination in the society and government adds another layer of pressure. Though Copts make up 17 to 20 percent of Egypt's population (less if you use government statistics), not one of the provincial governors and less than 1 percent of the National Assembly are Copts. For all these reasons, more than 500,000 Copts are estimated to have left Egypt for the West in the past decade. Occasionally some Muslim and Christian intellectuals challenge the status quo, but several of these, like Faraq Foda of Cairo University, have been killed by the militants.

Laypeople, religious journalists, clergy, and scholars who work with biblical texts, archaeology or Middle East tourism or who are simply concerned with the survival of the church in the places of its birth should read this book. But let them do so alert to the curse of history and the political legacy that Westerners bring to the Middle East. Robert Fisk has noted, "The Arab Christians' principle problem is that the West is Christian." As long as governments such as ours (erroneously viewed as "Christian" by most Arabs) bomb Iraq and impose punitive sanctions that harm Iraq's people without weakening Saddam Hussein's despicable regime, or veto United Nations resolutions condemning illegal Israeli settlements, we will be viewed as one-sided intruders into the region. This turns indigenous Middle Eastern Christians into an expendable "fifth column" in the view of their countries' majorities, and Christian sites into Disneyland and empty museums for Western tourists, rendering the once vibrant Christianity of the Middle East a relic of history.