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+ John McAreavey

Christians in the  
Middle East

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# Christians in the Middle East

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In 1997 the Scots writer, William Dalrymple, wrote *From the Holy Mountain: a journey in the shadow of Byzantium*, an account of a journey he made on foot in the Middle East in the mid-1990's. Setting out from Mount Athos in Greece, he travelled through Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Egypt, searching for remnants of Byzantium. Dalrymple refers to 'a degree of prejudice and intolerance in Israel reminiscent of other Middle Eastern countries – notably Turkey – where a religiously homogeneous majority is able to lord it over a relatively powerless minority community'.<sup>1</sup>

*The Vanishing: the twilight of Christianity in the Middle East* is written a generation later. Given the history of the Middle East over the period, it is no surprise that the author, Janine di Giovanni is a war correspondent who has reported on wars and civil unrest for over thirty years. She has experienced at first hand the impact of wars and revolutions on Christian communities in Iraq, Gaza, Syria and Egypt. *The Vanishing* documents her experiences in these countries over thirty years, particularly their impact on the lives of Christians and their communities. Though self-effacing about her own Christian faith, it informs her account in a powerful way. It provides some balance in an account that is shocking and depressing:

This is a book about dying communities, but it is also about faith. I wrote it so that the people I documented would never disappear. They are here on these pages, and therefore they live forever. But I also wrote it as a way of acknowledging that their faith, in many ways, is more powerful than any of the armies I have seen trying to destroy them (p. 220).

1 The situation in Israel has not changed. Writing in the *Sunday Times* on 12 December 2021, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem warn of a concerted attempt by fringe, radical groups to drive Christians away from the Holy Land - which takes place against the 'historic tragedy' of the Christian population's century-long decline (<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/archbishops-warn-concerted-effort-drive-christians-holy-land>).

2 Janine di Giovanni, *The vanishing: the twilight of Christianity in the Middle East*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

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## CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### IRAQ

The Christian community in Iraq traces its origin to St Thomas the Apostle; the Eastern Aramaic speakers there are one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Before the war, there were 1.4 million Christians in Iraq; now there are between 250,000 and 300,000. One man says, 'Even with ISIS gone, there's another big threat; there is no work for us. Our enemy is emigration' (p. 45). Christians in Iraq put their faith in Saddam Hussain: 'they gave their support in return for protection' (p. 46).

### GAZA

Di Giovanni has made many visits to Gaza, which is 'surrounded by the humiliation of checkpoints, inspections and barricades' (p. 72), adding, 'Gazans receive four hours of electricity per day, fresh water supplies are limited; only 5% of the water is drinkable' (p.76). She cites Fr Mario da Silva, the Brazilian priest who had served there: 'It's too difficult to live here. Difficult for people without income. Difficult to live without freedom. Christians cannot visit their families in Jerusalem. They can't work in Tel Aviv. There is no future' (p.89). Community leaders are in two minds: they do not want their people to leave and they realise that for many it is the only hope of a decent life. One person described Gaza as 'a cemetery of talent' (p. 100). Two women said to the author, 'More than money ... what people need here is prayer' (p. 114).

### SYRIA

The impact of war on Syria has been immense: It 'was ripped apart at the seams, half its people dead or displaced. It was one of the worst humanitarian crises in history, certainly the worst I had witnessed in thirty years of fieldwork' (p. 117). Syrian Christians quickly became targets of violence, as ISIS and other violent groups began their campaign against religious minorities in late 2012. As a result, 'virtually all Christians in the northeast left, taking with them a rich cultural tradition that dates to the earliest days of the faith' (p.110). Part of that tradition are villages, like Maaloula where the people still spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

### EGYPT

The situation of Christians in Egypt is invidious. The NGO *Open Doors* reported that 128 Christians were killed there in 2017

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because of their faith (p. 167). They are often – politically – caught in crossfire: the bombing of churches and displays of Christian persecution are a way of showing the government’s powerlessness in the face of the extremists (p.168). Like so many Christians in the Middle East, many Egyptian Christians feel that their future lies elsewhere (p. 177). One Christian said, ‘the underlying sense of inferiority is our greatest persecution ... Moslems really don’t want us to have a voice’ (pp. 179-80).

In the final pages Di Giovanni writes movingly:

My life’s work has been to tell stories for those who did not have the ability to tell them themselves for fear of persecution, subjugation, and sometimes even death. Most of them cannot be listed here due to that fear ... (p. 224)

## A RESPONSE

Di Giovanni speaks of the violence ‘that has a way of arriving like a fierce sandstorm, devouring everything in its path’ and overturning the way of life, the culture and faith of communities that traced their origins back to the origins of Christianity. It is important that we offer Christian communities in the Middle East the support of our solidarity, expressed in prayer, awareness and practical help. As noted above, Christians in the Middle East have expressed a need for our prayers. The current issue of *Intercom* (December 2021-January 2022) offers a prayer for the feast of the Epiphany:

We pray for those suffering for their faith, remembering the Christian communities in the Holy Land, the Middle East. May God give them courage, help them to persevere and keep them safe from harm (p. 46).

Another expression of solidarity is to be informed about events in the Middle East, especially as they affect Christian communities. Since 1998 a group of Church representatives of Bishops’ Conferences in Europe, the US and Canada travel to the Holy Land in January. I quote from its website:

Mandated by the Holy See, the Holy Land Co-ordination meets every January in the lands of Christ’s birth, ministry, Passion and Resurrection. It aims to act in solidarity with the Christian communities there and shares in the pastoral life of the local Church as it experiences extreme political and social-economic pressure.<sup>3</sup>

3 <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/holy-land/holy-land-co-ordination/holy-land-co-ordination/>

## CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In 2016 I had the privilege of participating in this pilgrimage, which included a visit to Gaza and other locations on the West Bank.

### DEFEATING MINORITY EXCLUSION AND UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: CHRISTIANITY IN THE HOLY LAND

This report, issued by Christian leaders in the Holy Land in December 2021, is an initiative of the International Community of the Holy Sepulchre to provide practical assistance to Christians living in Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Among the report's suggestions are the creation of "high tech start up hubs" to encourage and coordinate international investment amongst Christians living in the Holy Land.

Speaking remotely to parliamentarians, campaigners and media figures, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, extended his personal blessing to the initiative. In this, he was joined by several other Church leaders, including Fr Francesco Patton, Custos of the Holy Land, and Hosam Naoum, Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem.

Speaking in person at the event, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop Anba Angaelos emphasised the importance of defending religious freedom for adherents of all faiths and none, alongside economic and social support for vulnerable communities.

Professor Francis Davis and Dr Georgios Tsourous, the report's co-authors, stated that the "combination of rootedness, entrepreneurial agency, human solidarity, and vulnerable minority status" make the Christian community in the Holy Land "an intensively creative" one.

Christian tourism in the region provides over \$3 billion to the economy of Israel alone, with Christians comprising 53 per cent of incoming tourism flights to the middle eastern nation. The future of Christians in Israel, Jordan and Palestine, was, however, "more vulnerable than it needs to be" in the words of Professor Davis, in part because their contribution had been "massively underestimated".<sup>4</sup>

### GOOD FRIDAY COLLECTION

At a local level, the collection for the Holy Land taken up on Good Friday provides a way for every parish to support the mission of the Church in the Middle East. The website states:

4 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14682/economic-contribution-of-christians-to-holy-land-under-threat>

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This special collection originated from the Popes' wishes to maintain a strong bond between the Holy Places of the Holy Land and all Christians of the world. It is the main source of sustenance for life around the Holy Places, and is also the tool through which the Custody of the Holy Land is able to sustain and carry forward the important mission to which it is called: to preserve the holy places, the stones of memory, and to favour the Christian presence, the living stones of the Holy Land, through many activities of solidarity such as the maintenance of pastoral, educational, welfare, health and social structures. The territories which benefit from the Collection are Jerusalem, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

With *The Vanishing*, Janine di Giovanni has left us in her debt. She witnesses to the suffering of Christians and their communities in the Middle East; those who read it cannot fail to be moved by it.

5 <https://ffhl.org/good-friday-collection-for-the-holy-land/>

**As an individual you need community.** Very quickly after his conversion, Ignatius Loyola set a out building a group of like-minded individuals. Not only were they setting up a new kind of religious community (mission focused), but they were in dialogue with the church and tradition. Left to their own devices, it is all too easy for people to get off track, to get caught up in the ego (selfishness), and to rationalise and justify all sorts of things. People need support in terms of other spiritual guides and a supportive Christian community to help them stay focused. Being part of a tradition means that there are checks and balances. There is a sense of accumulated wisdom and learning from the past, especially when it comes to what have proven to be dead ends.

– BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Channelling the Inner Fire*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022, p. 36.