

## PUBLICATIONS AND BOOK REVIEWS

William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997). 483 pp.; photographs. Cloth \$30.00; paper \$16.95.

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- [1] William Dalrymple has written an extraordinary book about an extraordinary journey through the Christian Middle East. A travel writer with a rich interest in history, art, religion and culture, Dalrymple has succeeded in capturing the complex textures of Christianity in the Middle East past and present with a surprisingly astute understanding. It is not often that one encounters a work as discerning, appreciative, and probing as this from the pen of one outside the traditions or the scholarship of the regions involved. The feat is a remarkable one. The results are a book that matters for all who are interested in eastern Christianity, scholar and lay person alike.
- [2] Dalrymple undertook his trip from a dual perspective. His starting point was John Moschus' seventh century monastic travel record, *The Spiritual Meadow*. Much enamored of Moschus' adventures and descriptions from his journey through the monasteries of the eastern Roman Empire, Dalrymple decided to replicate that journey in 1994, retracing Moschus' route as closely as possible. At the same time, he was interested in the particular historical circumstances of the two parallel journeys. Moschus, travelling with his younger friend and disciple Sophronius, witnessed the crumbling of the eastern empire in its final years of Byzantine rule as war with Persia raged throughout the eastern territories. Moschus himself died in 619, but Sophronius was subsequently consecrated patriarch of Jerusalem; as such, he witnessed the Muslim conquest and indeed, would himself hand over the keys of the city in 638 to the conquering Caliph Omar at the end of a long and brutal siege. Dalrymple presents his own journey as a witness to the completion of the fierce tragedy whose beginning is recorded in *The Spiritual Meadow*: the destruction of Christianity as an indigenous and historical presence in the Middle East, as its small numbers of remaining adherents steadily emigrate to the politically safer territories of the western world.

[3] The book is spellbinding. It begins on Mt. Athos, where Dalrymple was allowed to consult the oldest surviving manuscript of *The Spiritual Meadow*. From there, Dalrymple travelled to Istanbul, then to eastern Turkey and Tur 'Abdin, to Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt. Wherever he went, he sought to retrace Moschus' route, to visit the remains of Moschus' era, to stay in the same monasteries and visit the same shrines as Moschus had done many centuries before. At the same time, Dalrymple is a man deeply concerned about the current historical situation. With an informed and sensitive eye, he records the situations, experiences, conditions, memories, and perspectives of the peoples he encounters, whether Christian, Jew, or Muslim. He writes with wit and grace, hilarious in his depiction of the practicalities of travel in the Middle East, and always delightfully enthralled by the endearing idiosyncracies of the people he meets. Indeed, a gentle reverence attends his treatment of the people who serve as guides, hosts, instructors, and helpers on his way.

[4] In no sense a scholar of ancient Christianity, Dalrymple has yet read widely in the history and culture of the regions he visits. The book constantly moves between antiquity and the present, and looks at the people through the lens of profoundly long traditions. Scholars will wince at the inaccuracies of historical details for the ancient church, yet Dalrymple succeeds in capturing the turbulent flavor of life in the ancient cities and countryside of the eastern Roman Empire with a genuine feel for the vitality of it all. And if his discussions lack theological sophistication, they yet manage to convey real substance in the religious sensibilities he meets. Above all, his respect and appreciation for the monastic life—albeit, with a delicious sense of its humorous possibilities—shine through every encounter.

[5] Dalrymple himself reflects at the end of his trip on what was most instructive for him. This was the discovery that throughout the Middle East, the problems faced by Christians stem from quite different circumstances rather than, as he had expected, a consistent hostility from Islamic fundamentalism. In eastern Turkey the complexities of the Kurdish problem dominate the situation; in Lebanon, the difficult aftermath of the civil war; in Syria, the fragile pragmatic alliance with the current government (allowing Syria alone to offer, at the moment, a place where Christianity can actually flourish); in Israel, the Palestinian situation;

so that in Egypt alone, and even there only in certain areas, could fundamentalism be held up as a primary factor. The flip side to this grim picture is the degree of religious interaction Dalrymple repeatedly encountered at shrines and pilgrimage sites throughout his trip: Muslims and Christians side by side in their devotions at the holy sites, seeking intercession, praying for miracles, offering their wholehearted veneration of the saints. Time and again, he is struck by the interwoven life of the two religions at the level of ordinary people—this despite the overarching frame of unbroken political hostilities.

- [6] This is a book to cherish for its rich descriptions, its gorgeous evocation of people and their lives, its celebration of history as a living experience, and its profound affection for its subjects. It is also a book that breaks the heart. No one who has been part of eastern Christianity will be surprised by what is recorded here. Yet the story is told, with scathing honesty, in terms which say plainly the tragic loss that now seems irreparable. We can be grateful to William Dalrymple for the service he has thus rendered, bearing public witness to a situation generally ignored. Indeed, we can be grateful to him for more than this, for he has brought alive for western readers a history that matters tremendously, and no less in its current agony than in the full glory of its past. Read this book, and pass it on to everyone you know.