

PUBLICATIONS AND BOOK REVIEWS

Hans Hollerweger, *TURABDIN: Lebendiges Kulturerbe / Living Cultural Heritage / Canlı Kültür Mirası* (Linz, Austria: Freunde des Turabdin, 1999). 367 pp.; 478 color photographs. \$40.00.

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- [1] Hans Hollerweger, a Professor Emeritus of Liturgical Science at the Theological Faculty in Linz, Austria, has come up with a remarkable book about Turabdin, the heartland and the sanctuary of the Syriac Christians located in southeast Anatolia in modern Turkey. Hollerweger, a true and dear friend of Turabdin and its people and founder of the “Friends of Turabdin”, through his book *TURABDIN* captures the spirit of this mystical region and its Oriental beauty by providing an excellent “pictorial account of Turabdin, the Holy mountain of Syriac Christianity.” Also, the author’s thought provoking preface and two excellent introductory contributions by two renowned scholars, coupled with two important messages, one from His Holiness Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, and the other from Mor Timotheos Samuel Aktas, the Archbishop of Turabdin, together with the perceptive comments on each photograph and depiction contained in the book provide the context necessary for understanding and appreciating the artistic creativity of Turabdin as well as its social, cultural, historical and liturgical significance not only for Syriac Christians but for all Christendom.

- [2] This illustrated book takes the reader on a fascinating journey across the physical and cultural history of Turabdin and guides them through ancient churches and monasteries. It likewise introducing the region’s remaining inhabitants to the wider public by presenting them as a living community above all through the celebration of the their ancient liturgy performed in Aramaic, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Hollerweger, stresses the historical significance and religious importance of Turabdin through the following statement.

“Today, this high limestone plateau in southeast Turkey, between the Tigris and the Syrian border, with

its hills and valleys, seems remote. But, once upon a time, Romans and Byzantine emperors, reigning in Rome and Constantinople, ruled not only over regions and countries in the West, but also over Turabdin in the East. This far-off region has long captured public attention, at one time as a stronghold on the border of the Empire, later on as the center of the Syriac Church and nowadays as a cornerstone of Christianity in the Middle East.” (p. 14)

Hollerweger informs us how Christianity was preached in Turabdin at an early time. This is known from the fact that in 120 A.D. there was a bishop in Beth Zabday (Azakh). With the flourishing of monasticism in the region, which is a distinctive feature of Turabdin, the inhabitants of Turabdin were finally converted to Christianity through the monks in the fourth century. This ascetic movement left its mark on the region of Turabdin that came to be interpreted as “The Mountain of the Servants of God”.

- [3] Hollerweger’s interest in Syriac Christianity seems to have been prompted by two factors. First, his liturgical background as a Professor of Liturgical Science at the Theological Faculty in Linz, Austria, gave him a good knowledge of the Syriac Liturgy and appreciation of its beauty. Secondly, his ecumenical vision and more importantly his true Christian love for the least of the brethren, the ‘Forgotten Christians’ of Turabdin, led him to become the ‘voice of the voiceless’. He states: “Many [the inhabitants of Turabdin] had left their native area and had emigrated to the West in the hope of finding a secure future. Those who remained were in need of a feeling of solidarity, which I tried to give to them through the organization ‘Friends of Turabdin’” (p. 14) a few paragraphs later, he states his appreciation of the Syriac liturgy saying: “As a professor of liturgy, I have had the opportunity of experiencing the precious legacy of the West Syriac Liturgy both in Mor Gabriel Monastery and at the liturgical services in the bishop’s church, Mort Shmuni in Midyat.” (p. 14) Then he goes on to talk about the central role of the liturgy in the monastic life of Turabdin and the unifying factor of the liturgy by bringing together the Syriac Orthodox and Christians of other denominations living in Turabdin.

- [4] Hollerweger’s first visit to Turabdin was in the middle of 1980s. Since then, his continuous regular annual visits to the region made him very familiar and knowledgeable about the history of

Turabdin, as well as its people, their daily life, culture and ancient tradition. It seems that the more Hollerweger became acquainted with the region and its people; the mutual bond of love between them grew stronger. He states, "The inhabitants of Turabdin impress me most of all by their originality and simplicity, by their attachment to their native soil, by their fortitude in difficult times, by their self-confidence and lack of pretentiousness" (p. 14). Furthermore, what is of special interest to him is that the inhabitants of Turabdin still use the language spoken by Jesus, an Aramaic dialect today known as *Turoyo*. He concludes by saying, "This makes them the bearers of an uninterrupted tradition from the beginnings of Christianity until the present day. Here on the plateau of Turabdin, formerly isolated and cut off from the world, they have been able to preserve their culture, a culture which cannot be transferred to any other region." (p. 14)

- [5] The book contains two brilliant essays that stemmed from the pen of two renowned British scholars: Sebastian Brock of Oxford University and Andrew Palmer of London University. Brock, with his essay entitled "Tur'Abdin- a Homeland of Ancient Syro-Aramaean Culture," draws attention to the cultural background of Syriac Christianity, emphasizing that Turabdin or "Mount Athos of the East" as it is sometimes referred to by the European writers, is not only famous for its multitude of ancient churches and monasteries, with their magnificent architecture that has attracted many historians and architects, but also known for its cultural role played by the innumerable scribes in the transmission of texts. He states: "over the course of centuries and continuing right up to the present day, innumerable scribes have been at work in the churches and monasteries of Tur'Abdin, copying out Syriac liturgical and literary texts" (p. 23). Palmer, the author of the book entitled "Monk and Mason on Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur'Abdin" (Cambridge, 1990), is very familiar and knowledgeable about Turabdin and its people. This is also reflected in his contribution under the title "The 1600-Year History of the Monastery of Qartmin (Mor Gabriyel)" in which he first situates Turabdin in a historical context and traces its development and changes up to our time. He then focuses on the Monastery of Qartmin (Mor Gabriel), one of the few remaining active monasteries in the region and undoubtedly the most active one today. He talks eloquently of the history of the Monastery, its

structure, architecture, style and liturgical symbolism associated with its artifacts. Palmer then goes on to give a detailed historical account of the major relevant events of the Monastery and its development.

- [6] The book is thoughtfully arranged and skillfully divided into geographically based chapters that introduce the reader to the ancient churches and monasteries, villages and towns of Turabdin which are now depleted by large scale emigration, but nevertheless remain a living testimony of the glorious past and pointing to a hopeful future. The book is very rich in illustrations and includes about five hundred photographs, both in color and in black and white, that present the true image of Turabdin. Like a bouquet of flowers gathered from the 'Fertile Crescent', these photographs while on the one hand, reveal the various aspects and magnificence of churches and monasteries with their beautiful architecture, decoration, furnishings and artifacts as well as the liturgical rites and symbolism associated with Syriac Christianity; on the other, they picture the life in Turabdin, showing the colorful scenes of acorn grown mountains and hills, exotic gardens and blooms, traditional Syriac foods and clothes, and shedding light upon the different aspects of life and conditions of the Syriac people. All photographs are accompanied with captions in three different languages providing further details of each depiction.

- [7] This fascinating book of *TURABDIN* by Hollerweger, which is a true celebration of the spiritual and cultural richness as well as the geographical beauty of the region and its sacred monuments, comes in handy for the Jubilee Celebration in observation of the two thousand years of Christianity of which Turabdin has truly been one of its faithful herald and still continues to be so. The book fulfills both the expectation of the people of Turabdin and meets the need felt by the public and specialists alike. It will be an invaluable tool for students and scholars in the field of history, religion, spirituality and Near East studies and above all to those who are interested in the mysterious Syriac Orient and its distinct Christian tradition. It is no doubt that it will especially be of immense help to the Syriac community in the diaspora in rediscovering their roots, rejoicing in their glorious past and carrying the torch of light brightly to future generations. The book is remarkable indeed. It is clear, well written and colorfully presented. Furthermore, it makes it more accessible to a wider

audience since the text is beautifully and eloquently composed in three languages: German, English and Turkish. Poetically, I would conclude by saying *TURABDIN* is a jewel that should be treasured in everyone's library and, like a colorful flower, planted in every reader's garden to enjoy both its beauty and sweet fragrance that pleases both the eye and heart.