

# The Small Sects Under Fire

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*Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East*

by Gerard Russell, with a foreword by Rory Stewart

Basic Books, 320 pp., \$28.99



*Moises Saman/Magnum Photos*

*Yazidi men from Sinjar, northern Iraq, at a makeshift camp on the outskirts of the Kurdish-controlled town of Derek, Syria, after fleeing Islamic State militants, August 2014*

In August, President Obama announced a series of air strikes against the advancing forces of the Islamic State (IS), the self-declared “caliphate” in northern Iraq. The aim was not only to support embattled Kurdish forces in the region, but also to protect thousands of beleaguered members of the mysterious religious minority known as the Yazidis. Americans soon learned that the Islamists were targeting the Yazidis for their reputation as “devil worshipers.” News organizations scrambled to find experts who could provide clarification—among them Gerard Russell, a former British diplomat and a fluent speaker of Arabic and Dari, who had widely traveled in Iraq and adjacent regions, and was about to publish *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*.\*

The Yazidis, as he explained, do indeed have some rather startling beliefs: among other things their religion forbids them to eat lettuce or to wear the color blue. But they do not

venerate demons. They are monotheists who believe in a supreme god, but without sharing the Abrahamic religions' understanding of heaven and hell. The source of the prejudice against the Yazidis comes from their high regard for a divine servant, Melek Taus or the "Peacock Angel," who once demonstrated his fealty to God by refusing to bow down to Adam. In the Yazidi tradition, the supreme deity pardoned him for this act of well-intentioned insubordination. Unfortunately, as Russell notes, the Yazidis also identify this most potent of angels with Azazel or Iblis, "which in the Muslim tradition (and the Jewish and Christian ones, for that matter) are names for the greatest of angels, who rebelled against God and was cast down into hell—in short, the devil." This is why, over the centuries, many outsiders have unjustly accused the Yazidis of being "devil worshipers." Of such nuances is religious hatred born.

And these days there's a lot of that hatred to go around. We find ourselves living, once again, in an age of sectarian conflict. This comes as something of a surprise. Not long ago the process of secularization was regarded as virtually unstoppable in broad parts of the world. Even in the Middle East, where Islam has been central for so long, modernization appeared to be triumphing over "superstition" as recently as the 1970s; secular political philosophies such as Marxism, Baathism, and capitalism claimed to have the weight of history on their side. How could belief in God possibly compete?

Yet yearning for the divine has proven remarkably resilient. The religious revival of the late twentieth century has touched almost every region of the world. There are now some 1.2 billion Roman Catholics. Evangelical Christianity, particularly Pentecostalism, has been spreading with extraordinary speed in Latin America and Africa. Russian Orthodoxy (thanks in part to assistance from Vladimir Putin) has once again become a major political force in the Russian-speaking world, while the "new religion" of Falun Gong (Falun Dafa) still poses a surprisingly persistent ideological challenge to Communist Party rule in China. One of the hottest fronts in today's religious wars is Southeast Asia, where resurgent Buddhism has fueled increasingly militant social movements in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma.

The winners of this global rebirth tend to be the big, well-established proselytizing religions. But their triumph isn't always good for other believers. The spread of the global faiths sometimes come at the cost of smaller and localized ones—above all those, like the Yazidis, that have little interest in recruiting new members. A bit like animal species perilously confined to isolated islands of habitat, religious minorities can find their very existence imperiled by surrounding monocultures.

In his remarkable book about vanishing religions, Gerard Russell visits a community of the group called the Kalasha, who practice a complex, polytheistic creed. The Kalasha, who number roughly four thousand, have managed to preserve their traditions thanks to the remoteness of their homeland, an inaccessible valley high up in the Hindu Kush mountains of northwest Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan. This has helped them to preserve their distinctly un-Islamic culture, which includes wine-drinking, group dancing, and an obsession with ritual purity. Visiting a Kalasha village during a festival to mark the winter solstice, Russell is scolded for touching a building, which must thereupon be repurified by a ceremonial burning of juniper branches. Women who are going through menstruation live in a house separated from the rest of the community.

But despite the physical and spiritual barriers that insulate them from their surroundings, many members of the group still feel intense pressure to adopt Islam, which is dominant everywhere around them. When Russell asks Wazir, a former Kalasha, about his decision to become a Muslim, the man responds with a shrug:

Wazir told me that he had been the only Kalasha boy in his class at secondary school. "The teacher asked if there were any Kalasha pupils, and I put up my hand," he told me. "I was the only one. I was made fun of a lot." When they asked him questions about his beliefs, he had no answers to give them. As he told me: "If I ask Kalasha people, 'Why do we do this thing?' or 'Why do we follow that tradition?' they will only say, 'That was how our grandparents did it.' They don't know what it means."

By contrast, Russell writes, someone who decides to become a Muslim merely needs to speak the *shahadah*, the profession of faith: "I witness that there is one God and that Mohammed is his prophet." That is the essence of Islam; everything else is elaboration.

It is, indeed, this tremendous simplicity at the core of the Muslim faith that has long proved one of its greatest attractions. But I couldn't help feeling regret about Wazir's decision. It is sad to think that the utterly unique culture of the Kalasha may one day disappear as other members of the community follow his example. And this, indeed, is the central theme of Russell's remarkable book. Aside from the Kalasha, the religious cultures Russell describes include the Yazidis (who actually refer to themselves as "Ezidis"), the Zoroastrians, the Mandaeans, the Samaritans, the Druze, and the Copts. All belong to hardy minority groups that have exploited quirks of history or geography that have allowed them to survive against the odds. Yet the growing reach of modern governments and media, as well as the dawning of a new age of regional conflict, means that they may disappear.

Russell admirably resists the temptation to dismiss these groups as primitives whose beliefs are inevitably doomed. He notes, for example, that the Kalasha, "traditionally an egalitarian and democratic people without permanent leaders," show a marked reluctance to leave their valley for life in the cities down below, presumably because of their culture's strong emphasis on sociability and mutual support. "From my own Western standpoint," he writes, "every day seemed to be a struggle for them, but I reflected that they also never had to deal with the problems modern urbanites face: being in a crowd of strangers, being the odd one out, being lonely." Russell's sympathetic and balanced portrayal of Kalasha life doesn't gloss over its less attractive aspects, including its obsession with purity. But I couldn't help wondering whether a backwoods settlement of liberal humanists governed by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris would make for an equally appealing collective.

It is no accident, perhaps, that the great virtue of Russell's book is its courageous spirit of sympathy for an immense range of human experience—a spirit often markedly lacking in some of today's more aggressive atheists. Russell is not an apologist for religion; indeed, it's hard to detect any beliefs of his own, aside from a desire to explore the unique and often rich cultures of his subjects. Like Karen Armstrong, the former nun turned historian of religion, Russell has no objection to secularism; he has a profound respect for the need to respect the peaceful coexistence of what Armstrong and others call the principles of *mythos* and *logos*. The latter is the world of rational scientific inquiry; the former is the realm of the spiritual search, the deeply human urge to tell stories about the ultimate meaning of existence that are, by their very nature, inherently unprovable. You don't have to believe in the literal truth of narratives about the sacred in order to understand their beauty, or to recognize the mysterious ways in which they enhance ethical awareness or feelings of community (or, indeed, severe intolerance).

Indeed, Russell exults in the obscure, the outlandish, and the implausible. In a Yazidi temple he watches teenagers enacting a ritual to bring themselves luck by throwing a bundle of silk over their shoulders at a stone in the wall, "which I thought might be a statue so worn away over time that its features were unrecognizable." Some believers explain to him that the stone is actually mysteriously suspended in midair—and note disapprovingly that some of their insufficiently pious fellows had "insisted on putting up a wall behind it." Other Yazidis tell him the story of a man who has a dream in which he's visited by a saint—and wakes up to find himself suddenly endowed with a remarkable musical talent. A Kalasha shaman prays for Russell in Arabic and promises him good fortune with his book. "I had not told anyone that I was writing one," he notes wryly.

In Oxford's Bodleian Library, Russell steeps himself in the works of E.S. Drower, a British scholar from the 1930s who managed to record the esoteric beliefs of the Mandaeans, a group from the marshes of southern Iraq. Russell is particularly impressed by the figures who populate their legends:

There is Krun, the flesh mountain, who sounds a bit like Jabba the Hutt; as Drower wrote, "The whole visible world rests on this king of darkness, and his shape is that of a huge house." There is Abraham, who appears as a failed Mandaean guided by an evil spirit to leave and found his own community. There is the dragon Ur, whose belly is made of fire and sits above an ocean of flammable oil. There is Ptahil, "who takes souls to be weighed and sends his spirits to fetch souls from their bodies." My favorite was the demon Dinanukht, who is half man and half book and "sits by the waters between the worlds, reading himself."

We can see these bizarre characters as figures with a long and illuminating pedigree. As Russell observes, there is much in the Mandaean metaphysical system that can be traced back to the beliefs of the Gnostics, who emerged as a kind of alternate church in the first centuries of the early Christian era, and even back to ancient Babylon. Such links with the distant past are among the most striking features of Russell's book.

The Zoroastrians, for example, still practice an ancient Persian faith that exerted a profound and lasting influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Of the world's current population of around 200,000 Zoroastrians, a very large majority are members of the Parsi minority in India. Zoroastrians believe that the world is defined by a desperate struggle between the forces of good and evil that will one day culminate in the victory of the good, an event that will terminate human history. This eschatological idea represented a radical

departure from the cyclical vision of existence held by the Greeks and Romans, and may well have contributed to the common Abrahamic vision of “judgment day,” when God’s ultimate plan for humankind finally comes to fruition. Modern admirers of Zoroaster’s teachings, Russell writes, include C.S. Lewis, who tapped ancient Persian myths of the apocalypse for the climactic battle scene in his Narnia chronicles.



*Jean Gaumy/Magnum Photos*

*A celebration of Navroz, the Zoroastrian spring equinox festival, with a statue of Lenin in the background, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, March 2000*

Russell explains how the belief system of the Druze, whose present-day community is centered in the mountains of Lebanon, represents a continuation of the ideas of the ancient Greek cult of the Pythagoreans, who believed in reincarnation and the “music of the spheres”—the sound of the heavenly bodies as they move across the sky. The Mandaean theology owes much to the teachings of Mani, the third-century-AD Persian prophet, a strict vegetarian, who founded Manichaeism, a Gnostic offshoot that moved along the Silk Road all the way to China. (In the West, one of Mani’s followers almost became emperor in Rome; Russell invites us to imagine what the world might look like today had he done so.) We learn how the ancient cult of Mithras invented the handshake, and why the numbers seven and twelve have entrenched themselves in so many of our foundational texts (from the Bible to the legend of King Arthur).

The Alawites believe that the planets and stars are ethereal manifestations of the godhead—which is why one of their theologians had to indulge in some urgent rethinking when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, proving that the earth’s satellite is a big piece of rock. The Alawites also believe that Imam Ali, whom Shiites consider the first in a rightful line

of Muslim leaders, is actually the reincarnation of Simon Peter. Such heterodox notions are anathema to Sunni Muslims, who are the majority in Syria, and it is fear of retribution at Sunni hands that has made the Alawites such fanatical supporters of their coreligionist, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in his vicious prosecution of the civil war. And while the Mandaeans accept the Old Testament account of Yahweh's parting of the Red Sea, they sympathize not with the Jews but with the pursuing Egyptian soldiers who lost their lives when the waters closed.

Russell is trying to bring home a larger and highly topical point. He argues that the religious minorities he discusses in his book "connect the present to the past, bringing us within touching distance of long-dead cultures. They link the Middle East with European culture by showing how the two emerged from shared roots." And it is by examining these roots that Russell hopes to find some broader answers:

Thus the groups featured in this book seem to me to address three things that troubled me during my time in the Middle East: humanity's collective ignorance of its own past, the growing alienation between Christianity and Islam, and the way the debate about religion has become increasingly the preserve of narrow-minded atheists and literalists.

As Russell notes, Greek philosophy "is not a European phenomenon...but a Mediterranean one." Plato and Aristotle were revered not only by the humanists of the European Renaissance but also by the Druze. And, he might have added, by many Muslims as well: the study of the Greek thinkers is virtually obligatory in the seminaries of the Iranian Shiites. Some scholars say that Plato's *Republic* shaped Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of the Islamic state. "The Christians of Iraq a thousand years ago," Russell writes, "shared their church with Mongolians; they had a Chinese patriarch and a bishop of Tibet, and influenced the modern-day Mongolian and Tibetan alphabets."

All of this makes for an urgently needed corrective in our age of deepening religious divisions. Still, there is an unmistakably elegiac undertone to Russell's reporting. In Egypt, long traditions of interfaith tolerance were put to the test by the 2011 revolution, which was accompanied by violence against the Copts, who make up most of the country's sizable Christian minority. (Some surveys put the Copts at around 10 percent of the population, which would mean there are eight million of them in the country.)

The Copts practice a version of Orthodox Christian belief with extremely rigorous standards of prayer and fasting. They have lived in Egypt since the earliest years of Christianity. Now, in view of the intensifying religious polarization in Egypt, that two-thousand-year era could well be drawing to a close, as more and more Copts choose to leave. The decision to emigrate is made easier by the presence of large Coptic communities around the world.

A similar process is now well underway in Iraq, where the advance of IS forces threatens not only Yazidis but also Turkic-speaking Shiites (the Shiite Turkmen) and Iraq's Christian communities. Iraq's religious minorities have suffered to varying degrees since the American invasion in 2003 and the sectarian bloodletting that followed it. Virtually all of the Mandaeans, often targeted for abduction or killing by insurgents, have by now quit the country. Until recently the Yazidis enjoyed a degree of safety thanks to their relative isolation in the mountains along the edges of the Kurdish region, but that changed

dramatically in 2007, when a series of car bombs in a Yazidi village killed some eight hundred people in a few short minutes. This was one of the most destructive single acts of terrorism since September 11.

Russell fittingly ends his book with a journey to Michigan, now the major refuge for some of Iraq's endangered religious minorities. In the early twentieth century, the car factories of Detroit attracted large numbers of immigrants from the Arab world (including many Christians) with the promise of good jobs for workers who spoke only minimal English. Though the promise of jobs has ebbed, the immigrants continue to come, creating fertile ground for a range of subcultures. Dearborn, Russell learns, is the preferred place of settlement for Arab Muslims. Egyptian Copts are concentrated in the Detroit suburb of Troy. Grosse Pointe is the best place to find Catholic Maronites from Lebanon.

In a Detroit supermarket Russell experiences one of the most moving moments in a book that is often tinged with sadness. As he roams the aisles, Russell notices voices speaking a language that echoes with the sounds of Arabic or Hebrew, though it is neither: it is Aramaic. "Amid the Muzak and synthetic fruit drinks in a suburban American store, I was hearing the language of Christ." The people speaking it are Assyrian Christians from northern Iraq, the descendants of the legendary Church of the East. Its followers—some of whom (the Chaldeans) today answer to Rome—once claimed a tenth of all Christians among its flock. Their missionaries brought Christianity to China in 635. When Mel Gibson brought out his film version of the life of Christ, the Assyrians were among the few people in the world who could follow its Aramaic dialogue without the benefit of subtitles.

During the modern era, many Assyrian Christians settled in the city of Mosul, Iraq's second largest. In June, the jihadist army that would soon rename itself "Islamic State" captured the city, setting off an exodus of Iraqi Christians that could well mean the end of yet another ancient religious presence in the Middle East. There are already more speakers of Aramaic in metropolitan Detroit (around a hundred thousand) than in Baghdad; the head of the Assyrian Christians, Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, lives in Chicago. In the Midwest, they have their churches, clubs, restaurants, and newspapers. There is some comfort in the thought that they have found safety, and that in some degree their culture will endure. But this is small consolation for the loss of an entire world.

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\* See Gerard Russell, "The Peacock Angel and the Pythagorean Theorem," *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2014. [↪](#)