



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – October 2008

From the Holy Mountain

TRAVEL WRITING HAS never appealed to me much. This is probably one reason why I missed out on William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain*, 'a journey in the Shadow of Byzantium,' when it came out ten years ago. I am reading it now, after a friend drew it to my attention. Every so often you stumble across a book, a film, some music, a picture that changes everything for you. This, for me, is such a book.

Dalrymple sets himself the task of journeying from Mount Athos, the Greek home of Orthodox monasticism, through Constantinople (modern Istanbul), Turkey, Syria, Israel, and Jordan, into Egypt, finishing at Kharga. It is in part the journey of the Bethlehem monk, John Moschos, described in his *The Spiritual Meadow*. He set out in 578 AD. Dalrymple visits many of the same places, attempting, where possible, to stay in the very same monasteries and cities. *From the Holy Mountain* reveals the ruins and remains of a great Christian civilization, the Byzantine empire, which lasted 1,000 years, but which was destroyed when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453.

It is worth noticing that, under Muslim rule, Christians and Jews were flourishing minorities and that it is only in modern times – with the ascendancy of a secular Turkey, the bitter rivalries of the Holy Land and rising Islamic fanaticism – that Christianity in these Eastern regions has all but disappeared. The remnant – in Istanbul, in Antakya (Antioch – 'where the disciples were first called Christians', Acts 11:26), in the Holy Land – is now pathetically small and shrinking. Massive emigration has made the West the home of some of the most exotically Eastern forms of Christianity. Orthodoxy in the UK is now the fourth largest denomination.

It doesn't take much to work out that Europe is faced with the very same fate, if we don't learn quickly enough from our history. As with the Ottomans, the problem is not when one religion dominates – though Christianity's record for accommodating people of other beliefs, compared with the record of Islam is dismal – so much as with the heady mix of secularism, in-fighting and fundamentalism. European intellectuals and politicians have already tried to 'paint out' the role of Christianity in our culture. For in-fighting, look at Ireland a generation ago. For fundamentalism, look at the threat of terrorism now. Somehow we have to get beyond – behind – all this. We need – we must work for, we must pray for – a new Age of Faith. This begins not with empires and nations, religions and denominations, but with our walk with God, each one of us. By building our lives on Christ, as faithful disciples, by ordering our families, as homes of God's Presence, by living amongst others as salt and light, and leaven of the lump: these are the foundations of a new Age of Faith.

May God bless us as we journey to seek him on his holy mountain.

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