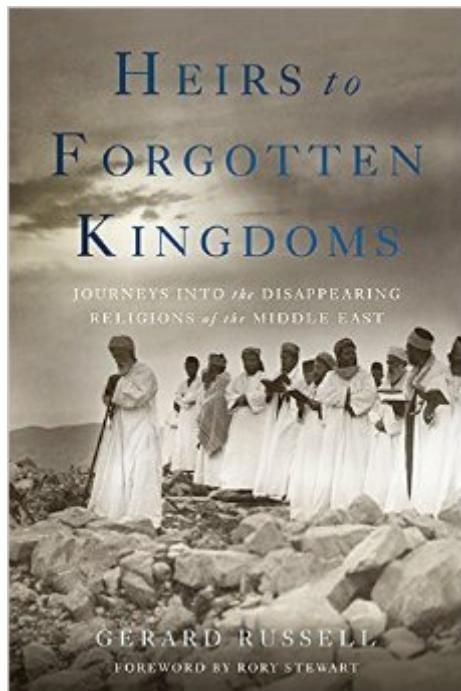


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Heirs To Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys Into The Disappearing Religions Of The Middle East



Synopsis

Despite its reputation for religious intolerance, the Middle East has long sheltered many distinctive and strange faiths: one regards the Greek prophets as incarnations of God, another reveres Lucifer in the form of a peacock, and yet another believes that their followers are reincarnated beings who have existed in various forms for thousands of years. These religions represent the last vestiges of the magnificent civilizations in ancient history: Persia, Babylon, Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs. Their followers have learned how to survive foreign attacks and the perils of assimilation. But today, with the Middle East in turmoil, they face greater challenges than ever before. In *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*, former diplomat Gerard Russell ventures to the distant, nearly impassable regions where these mysterious religions still cling to survival. He lives alongside the Mandaeans and Ezidis of Iraq, the Zoroastrians of Iran, the Copts of Egypt, and others. He learns their histories, participates in their rituals, and comes to understand the threats to their communities. Historically a tolerant faith, Islam has, since the early 20th century, witnessed the rise of militant, extremist sects. This development, along with the rippling effects of Western invasion, now pose existential threats to these minority faiths. And as more and more of their youth flee to the West in search of greater freedoms and job prospects, these religions face the dire possibility of extinction. Drawing on his extensive travels and archival research, Russell provides an essential record of the past, present, and perilous future of these remarkable religions.

Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Basic Books; Reprint edition (December 1, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0465049915

ISBN-13: 978-0465049912

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1.1 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (100 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #342,607 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #109 inÂ Books > Travel > Specialty Travel > Literary & Religious #119 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Religious Intolerance & Persecution #136 inÂ Books > Travel > Middle East > General

Customer Reviews

...that was a question I wondered about. We don't get much background from media who told us

ISIL had slaughtered them, hounded them, and then finally corralled them up an obscure mountain called Sinjar to end them. Who are these peculiar people of such primitive, ancient and 'backwoods' roots? The 21st century veil of obscurity is raised here by Russell. Here you can discover the Yazidis and Harranians, the Mandaeans, Zoroastrian's and Bhai, Druze, the Samaritans, the Copts and Kalasha in an extraordinarily well framed witness to "Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms". Russell takes the reader into the lethal peculiarities of these accursed living lines. We can see them through Russell's expert eye as they fade from existence in the harshest ways. This is the story of ancient 'heretics', followers of a lesser god and pagans living in the deepest tribal isolation under the unrelenting pressure of genocide in today's Islamic wars. Russell explores the ancient nuances revealed in the Islamic Sunni vs Shiite real estate grab of today. I was blind to the implications of Islamic 'justice', finally consummated according to medieval fatwas befalling these living heretics and pagans. Here is the story of 8th century justice at last rendered on the living. What struck me most in the fascinating read is the magnitude of the catastrophe. It must be historically unique to the 21st century. How can it be that these tightly knit and ancient enclaves are being lost forever with barely a peep from the mightier powers that might preserve them? Are they just not worth it? This book pulls hard at humanitarian concepts and pulls hardest at the reader's heartstrings ... the 'Last of the Mohicans' is the feeling. It seems this story can't possibly be true but a quick search attests to veracity.

Most reviews of this book focus on its timeliness in the face of ISIS (let alone Modernity). This is no doubt a good reason to read it. But here are some other reasons: 1. What insight into humanity's imagination! Every other page I exclaimed in delight at some marvelous story or ritual that Russell has uncovered - either in an ancient text he has found in some dusty archive, or by direct observation of its practice today. Consider the characters of Mandaean mythology. There is Krun, the flesh mountain, who according to Russell "sounds a bit like Jabba the Hutt"; the dragon Ur, who sits above an ocean of flammable oil, and, Russell's professed favorite, the demon Dinanukht, "who is half man and half book and 'sits by the waters between the worlds, reading himself.'" Or consider the Kalasha, whose rule-makers seem to have had a touch of OCD: "The right hand, the male sex, the high mountains, purity, odd numbers, and life all were affiliated with each other; to these were opposed the left hand, the female sex, the low valleys, impurity, even numbers, and death. So the men sat on the right-hand side of their houses and the women on the left. Likewise, it was men who herded the goats and women who planted crops, men who went into the mountains and women whose place was in the valleys, and women who were prone to all kinds of impurity." Russell then

tells how "I was scolded for touching a village house as I passed it, since even this made it impure, and meant more juniper branches would need to be burned to restore its pristine state."2. You'll learn a lotThe author wears his learning lightly, yet it bursts through on every page. What I appreciated especially was the enormous range of his references.

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