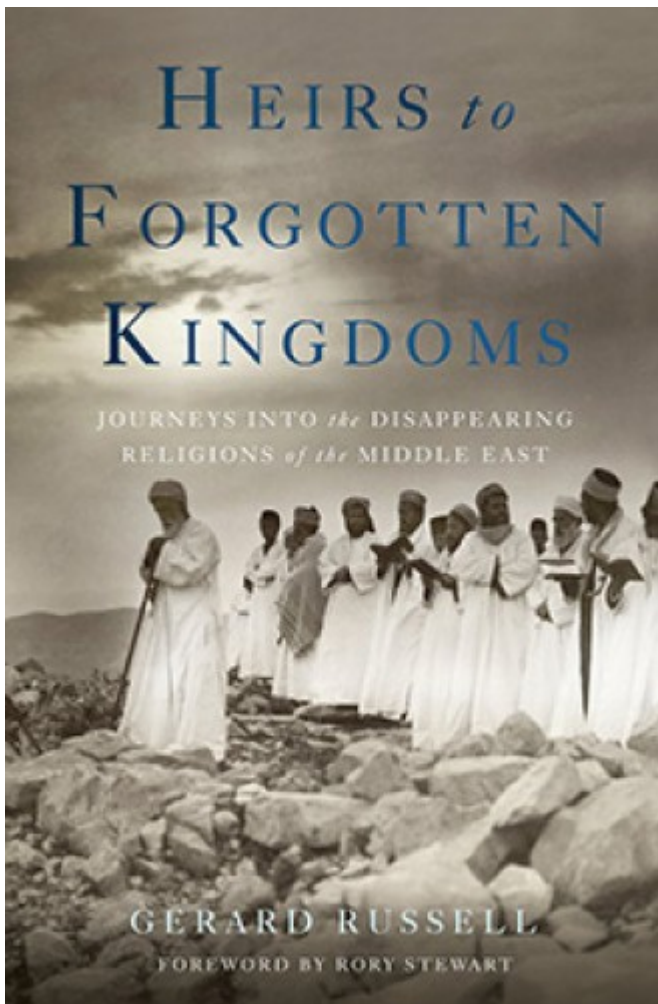


Endangered faiths

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms

By Gerard Russell

Basic Books

Gerard Russell has written a well-crafted and readable book in which an acute observer tells an intriguing and significant story, drawing heavily on personal observation. Yet the book's subject matter makes it difficult to read.

A hundred years ago, travelers regularly reported their travels among the religious and ethnic minorities of the Middle East, endlessly fascinated by the wonders they encountered. Today, though, most of those groups are on the verge of extinction in the region, and in some cases Russell may be describing the last of their kind. The elegiac quality of his account makes it heartrending and often infuriating.

Russell's book successfully walks the thin line between reportage and academic scholarship. Throughout, his accounts are based on firsthand encounters that he experienced during his years as a British diplomat. Russell has a sharp eye for telling details, for surprising quirks of speech or dress. He has also read widely in the relevant scholarship on often arcane religious traditions, and he presents his findings accessibly. Even his useful chapter on sources and further reading is highly user-friendly. Russell makes an excellent travel companion and guide. Even if you know the history of the region, you will learn much.

Most of the now-disappearing groups he describes have very deep roots, and their continued existence seems astonishing. To give an imaginary Western example, we would have to think of a remote province in western France, say, where a group of Valentinian Gnostics still maintains a church they founded in the second century, complete with its original scriptures and liturgies. Or imagine coming across a surviving Essene monastery in Spain, founded as a direct offshoot of Qumran.

If those examples seem far-fetched, look at the Mandaeans, who long flourished in what were once the rich marshlands of southern Iraq. Their religion is distantly related to Christianity and Second Temple Judaism, but in highly Gnostic forms. The Mandaeans' complex scriptures have been a gold mine for scholars of Gnostic and Manichaean ideas. The group's obscure origins might predate the Christian church. Might the Mandaeans be descended from followers of John the Baptist who fled threats of massacre during the Jewish Wars of the 60s? Conceivably, one alumnus of the movement could have been the third-century prophet Mani, whose new faith maintained the status of a world religion for over a millennium.

Just in the past half century the Mandaeans have been devastated, mainly by a marsh drainage scheme that Saddam Hussein launched with the deliberate goal of uprooting and disrupting minority communities. Subsequent wars and the rise of radical Islamist movements have made life impossible for such groups, who scarcely enjoy even the tenuous protection of being "People of the Book." Some 60,000 still survive, but almost all in diaspora outside Iraq. As Russell remarks, "Their departure

ends a chapter in human history that was opened more than eighteen hundred years ago.”

Similar remarks may soon apply to the Ezidis (Yazidis) of northern Iraq. Over the millennia, these descendants of ancient Zoroastrians have borrowed heavily from neighboring faiths, and their angelic hierarchy includes Malak Tawus, the Peacock Angel, who has misleadingly been identified with Satan. This theological quirk has long excited Western observers, who have speculated about the dark deeds of the “Yazidi devil worshipers.” Like the Mandaeans, the Ezidi people have the tragic misfortune to live in war-torn Iraq, where most recently they have been targeted by the Islamic State and its ludicrous restored caliphate.

The other groups Russell portrays include Zoroastrians (Parsis) in Iran, the Druze of Lebanon and Syria, and the Samaritans of Israel. Russell’s most obscure example is the Kalasha, a mysterious people living in Pakistan’s border regions, whose historically recent conversion to Islam has not prevented them from retaining many older pagan customs. Except for the Kalasha, all these groups retain vestiges of ancient faiths that were once much more widespread than they are today, making them at least distant cousins of Jews and Christians.

Samaritans, for instance, are familiar to readers of the New Testament, and in that era they constituted a major portion of the population in the larger Jewish world. Now, though, they number fewer than a thousand. The Druze, an Islamic sect whose beliefs probably draw on an ancient polytheism, are far more numerous. Even so, Druze leaders express alarm over the possibility that Islamist extremists will expel them from the Middle East, together with the remaining Christians.

All these groups are agonizingly aware of the Jewish experience in the region. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were all home to large and thriving Jewish communities in recent times. Jews made up a third of Baghdad’s population in the 1930s. Now almost no Jews remain in those countries. If the Jews could vanish so rapidly after a presence of more than two millennia, can any other community possibly feel secure?

One jarring moment in *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* comes when the author moves from these obscure peoples and presents a chapter on Egypt’s Coptic Christians. Surely that inclusion must be an error? Unlike the Mandaeans or the Ezidis, the Copts are part of a mighty global faith, and their numbers, while difficult to ascertain, might run to 8 or 10 million. “Disappearing” they certainly are not, but the

political circumstances in Egypt might ultimately make their position tenuous. The Jewish precedent stands as a nightmarish warning.

However diverse their beliefs or ideology, such minorities over time come to share certain common ways of thinking and acting that are essential to ensuring their survival. In extreme cases, such as that of the Druze, adherents maintain strict silence about their beliefs and often seek geographical seclusion. Commonly too, minorities have survived in well-defined regions that are not easily accessible to the forces of the state and religious orthodoxy, and their culture acquires the distinctive ways of those fastnesses, whether in the marshes, mountains, or deserts.

It would be unfortunate if readers approached *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* as a catalog of expiring spiritual traditions, of living fossils of faith. The book is above all a testimony to how minority movements can survive almost indefinitely under exceedingly harsh and unpromising conditions, and the degree to which they maintain their integrity under those circumstances. It is difficult to read such accounts without a sense of awe at human persistence and ingenuity.