

THE LAST CHRISTIANS

ANDREAS KNAPP



Andreas Knapp is a poet, priest and popular author based in Germany. He left his secure post as head of Freiburg Seminary to live and work among the poor as a member of a faith community called “Little Brothers of the Gospel.”

Today, he shares an apartment with three brothers in Leipzig’s largest housing project, where he ministers to prisoners and refugees.

His latest book, **The Last Christians**, recounts the stories of refugees in his neighborhood and of displaced people in camps in Kurdistan, northern Iraq.

CWRm caught up with him for the following interview.

CWRm: How did you come to encounter and write about *The Last Christians*? And why do you call them that?

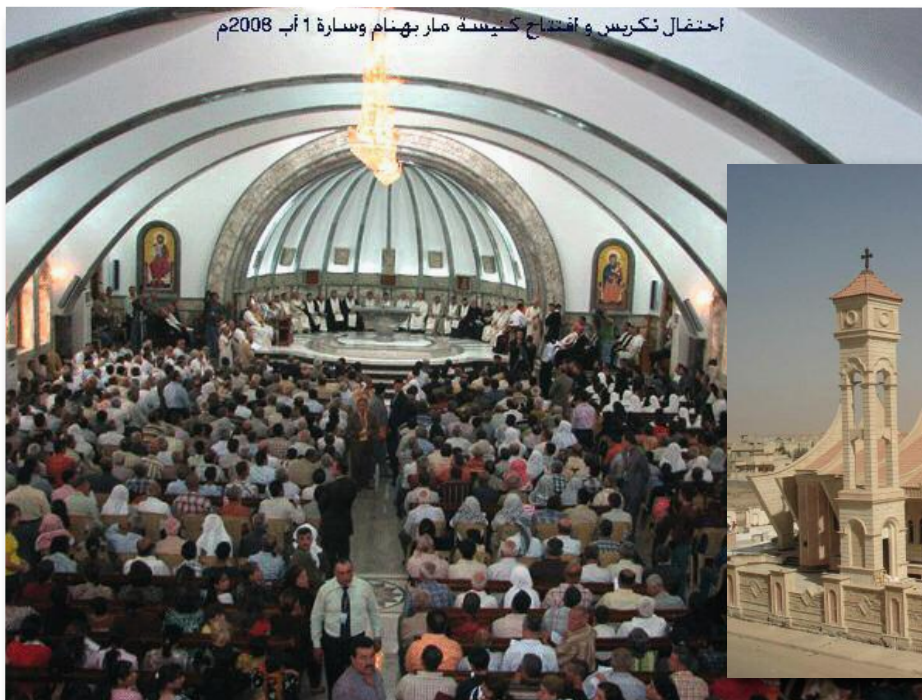
Andreas: I live in a neighborhood in Leipzig, Germany, where many refugees have arrived in the

last three years. My new neighbors come from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Most of them are Muslim, but I have also encountered Christians who have suffered great discrimination and persecution, most recently under the terrorism of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I was very affected by their stories, and I felt they should be written down and preserved.

I was also fascinated by the history of the Christians of the Middle East, especially when I discovered that there are still communities that speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus. I was touched as I heard these believers reciting the Lord’s Prayer in the language of Jesus and the early church. I call them “the last Christians” because their communities are destroyed and they have had to emigrate all over the world.

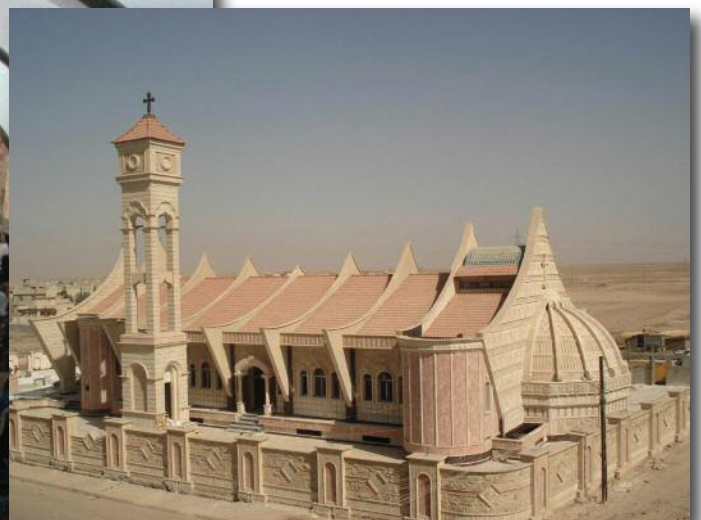
CWRm: Who are these Christian groups?

Andreas: The Aramaic or Syriac Christians are descendants of very old churches, dating back to the first Christian communities, such as Antioch



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Church of Saints Behnam and Sarah in Qaraqosh, Iraq





Funeral Procession for Archbishop Paulas Faraj Rahho, who was martyred in Mosul, Iraq in 2008.

and Damascus. They still use the language of Jesus in their liturgies—and some of them in everyday speech. The old Syriac churches spread over a large region that today comprises Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and southeast Turkey.

But permanent discrimination and growing persecution are driving the Syriac Christians from their home countries, especially Syria, Iraq and Turkey.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch shares a theological and pastoral communion with the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Armenian Church. There are differences in geography, language and culture, but they recognize each other as authentic churches and the members of these churches receive communion mutually.

CWRm: Tell us more about the last Christians' historic roots.

And what is their faith like now in the 21st century?

Andreas: Historically, the ancestors of Middle Eastern Christians generally date back at least 1400 years, because after the rise of Islam no one was allowed to convert to Christianity. During this entire time, there was strong social pressure for Christians to become Muslims.

The Syriac churches have a rich spiritual and philosophical history. Their monasteries preserved the writings of ancient Greek and Persian philosophy, mathematics and medicine. Syriac Christians translated Aristotle and Hippocrates into Aramaic and then Arabic. As missionaries, they traveled to China, India and the Philippines.

Today's Middle Eastern Christians keep alive this spiritual tradition. When ISIS demanded that they convert to Islam in order to remain in their

houses and keep their jobs, they decided to leave their homes and all their possessions. A bishop in Iraq said to me, "They lost everything—except their faith."

CWRm: What has been happening to them?

Andreas: When the original Christian region of Syria was conquered by Islam, the Christians became second-class citizens. They had to pay a special tax for practicing their faith and endured discrimination in everyday life.

In the long story of Islam, there have been some periods of greater tolerance. But the last centuries have seen an increased number of massacres. For example, in 1843 thousands of Aramaic Christians were brutally slaughtered by Kurds in an area to the north of Mosul. The women and girls left behind



Destruction of Mar Gorgees Church, Mosul, Iraq

CWRm: Following these events in the media is confusing to us. What should we watch and listen for that might bring clarity?

Andreas: For a long time, Western media showed relative indifference to the fate of Middle Eastern Christians. Believers living in the Middle East have no lobby in Western society.

Recently I have noticed an increasing attention to the suffering of these Christians. I listen to the reports of NGOs working in the Middle East and I

appreciate the news of the *“Society of Threatened Peoples”* (Germany). News reports by various Christian denominations also help spread the word.

CWRm: How can we in the West best help? Is anything you’ve seen effective?

Andreas: As Christians, we try to follow the example of Jesus, so we must help all refugees without asking about their nation, religion or language.

But we have to help the Christians in a special way—not because they belong to the same religion as us, but because they belong to a threatened minority.

Muslim refugees are more likely to find other countries in the Middle East where they can live in peace. That some very rich Arabic countries accept so few Muslim refugees is a scandal—and

were abducted and forced to convert to Islam. And anyone who protested was burned.

In 1900, around 20 percent of those living in the area now known as Turkey were Christian. But it wasn’t long before the national mania to create an exclusively Turkish state led to the first genocide of the twentieth century. The First World War kept public attention well away from what was happening in the remoter regions of the Ottoman Empire. Overshadowed by the atrocities committed against the Greeks (approximately 350,000 dead) and Armenians (about 1.5 million dead), the 1915/16 genocide of around 300,000 Aramaic Christians has barely registered in the global consciousness to this day.

Now, a hundred years later, Christians are once again being shot, beheaded or crucified.



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Refugee camp in Ankawa, Iraq

I don't understand why international policy doesn't put them under pressure. But for Christians, there is no place in the Middle East where they can live in religious freedom.

After the liberation of Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, some Christian families returned to their homes. They found them burned and their churches destroyed. There are initiatives to help them and I think these are worthy of support.

I'm afraid that it is too late to save some Middle Eastern churches in their homelands. Too many of their members have fled. There are some bishops, such as Cardinal Sako of Baghdad, who are fighting for the survival of their congregations. We can support these efforts to help Christians to remain in their villages or to return from the refugee camps.

They need economic and also political security. We should help them reconstruct their churches, build schools and create an economic future.

“The Middle Eastern Christians have remained faithful to their origins in Jesus. They do not return hate for hate. And they invite us to rediscover Jesus’ gospel of love and peace.”

We should also be helping Christians who are refugees in Europe or America because they have no hope of returning to their homelands. We can support them in their efforts to found Syriac communities and to maintain their culture and their faith.

CWRm: How has this experience changed your perspective and impacted your heart?

Andreas: I'm very touched by the Middle Eastern Christians and



Photograph by Allen Kakony

Christians displaced by violence take refuge in places of worship.

their faithfulness. They chose to lose their houses, their country and even their lives so that they wouldn't lose their faith. I wonder how I would react if faced with that alternative: remain in your house and country if you convert to Islam, or remain faithful to Jesus and

witness to love and nonviolence; he preached reconciliation and peace.

The Middle Eastern Christians have remained faithful to their origins in Jesus. They do not return hate for hate. And they invite us to rediscover Jesus' gospel of love and peace. □

Andrew Knapp serves immigrants and refugees, including Muslims and persecuted Christians. He is the author of The Last Christians.

leave everything behind.

So the faithful attitude of these believers is a challenge to take my own faith seriously. I ask myself: Is my faith really my greatest treasure, or is it only a secondary addition?

These exiled Christians are coming from the Middle East, where Jesus was born—the cradle of Christianity. They remind me of the origin of my faith. And they remind me that in the beginning of our faith, there was a man in whom people could recognize the presence of God. He bore

