A PEOPLE OF NO STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE: MIDDLE EAST CHRISTIANS & THE DISREGARD OF THE FOREIGN POLICY ELITE

Review by Faith McDonnell

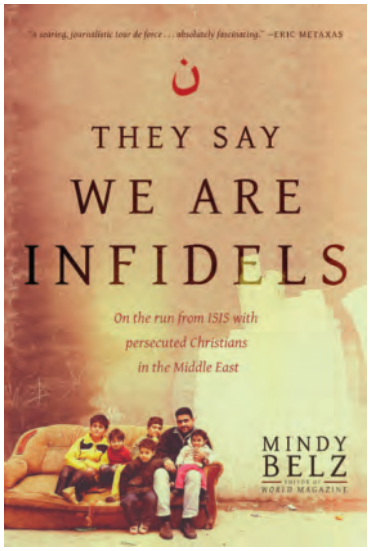
THEY SAY WE ARE INFIDELS: ON THE RUN FROM ISIS WITH PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by MINDY BELZ, Tyndale Momentum, 2016

On March 17, 2016, United States Secretary of State John F. Kerry issued a determination of genocide against ISIS ("Daesh"), naming Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims as victims. There had been very real fear that Christians would be omitted from the determination because for months the State Department claimed to lack hard evidence of Christian genocide. Specifically, Christians were not included in the U.S. Holocaust Museum's report. But the Hudson Institute's Nina Shea wrote in National Review that the report's authors "spoke with Yezidis, Shia Turkmen, and Shia Shabak but apparently not with any similarly aggrieved Christians. Neither Christian leaders nor Christian documentation sources are cited in the report."

No one who reads *They Say We Are Infidels: On the Run from ISIS with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East* by *World* Magazine editor Mindy Belz should ever doubt Christians are victims of ISIS genocide. They will also realize attempts to eradicate Middle East Christianity had been going on before Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself Caliph of the Islamic State.

Belz was embedded with the local Christian community and



documents the increasing suffering of an already suffering people. She explains, "I didn't go looking for Christians in Iraq; I stumbled upon them when I went to cover a U.S.-led war. But the vitality of the Christian community there would draw me in, and their underreported plight would compel me to return again and again" (xix).

By the time the ISIS genocidal nightmare began, Belz counted Iraqi and Syrian Christians as friends. She holds those personal relationships in tension with journalistic objectivity maintained over 13 years visiting the region. Consequently, no one writes about Middle East Christians' plight with more passion, authenticity, and insight than Belz. *Infidels* invites the reader to see Christians, Yezidis, and others as individuals, as fellow Christians, and as representatives of ancient threatened cultures.

As shocking as the decimation of Christian and minority communities itself is the continuing disregard for them by Western governments. Belz exposes this shameful indifference, something of which few seemed aware until ISIS sawed off Christian men's heads on a Libyan beach. While she covered stories of church bombings, and other attacks, a State Department official assured her, "We don't think there is a wave of violence against Christians; it's inadvertently happening as a result of the overall situation" (99). But by 2006, St. George's Church, Baghdad had a 24 page list of Christians either killed or kidnapped.

"Iraq's Christians and other minorities" had "long considered themselves allies of the United States," Belz explains, but to the U.S. Administration, they "didn't seem to enter into the equation" (168). Further, Belz says, Western forces dedicated to promoting Middle East freedom and democracy did not see the "strategic importance" of helping Christians. This compelled a young father to ask Belz what all the area Christians were asking: "Why is America standing up for the rights of Muslims and not for Christians" (167)?

Belz recalls a meeting of American and European military commanders at which a NATO adviser presented a report on the ongoing atrocities towards Christians and other minorities. The adviser asked the military officers, "Would you intervene if genocide comes to Iraq's Christians?" The American answer, "I would not deploy my troops to intervene." The British answer, "No, we would not intervene." The adviser "even reframed the question, 'Sir, with your history of liberty for all and desire to do what is right, would you not intervene?'" Again, the commanders told him they would not intervene (220-21).

Belz adds elsewhere:

> When they did see danger signs, Western leaders were reluctant to get involved. The U.S. leaders in particular, starting with George W. Bush's administration and continuing through the Obama presidency, traded an American legacy of standing up for minorities who faced annihilation—Holocaust survivors, Russian Pentecostals, Rwandans, Congolese, and many others—for a political advantage that never manifested itself. American leaders exchanged the lives of those targeted by sectarian militants for the supposed advantage of appearing nonsectarian. (xvii)

This was not only a tragic reversion of America's legacy, but a horrible mistake. The Christians' experience could have helped the United States and its allies in countering jihadist ideology, but no one was listening to them. And so, Article 2 of the new constitution of Iraq declared Islam "the official religion of the State" and "a fundamental source of legislation." The constitution should have represented all Iraqis and guaranteed individual rights and religious freedom for all. But instead, it "undermined the secular state itself" and ensured future strife (94).

Likewise, while ignoring natural allies, the U.S. wooed freedom's enemies. Belz mentions the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCRI). This political party with direct backing from Iran had little support from the Shiites, but the U.S. gave these Iranian proxies a seat on the Iraqi Governing Council anyway. "The Americans couldn't—or wouldn't—see that parties like SCRI sought a theocratic government," states Belz (25).

Amazingly, Western forces had little understanding of the deep, rich heritage of indigenous Christians back to the days of Abraham, Jonah, and Jesus and long before the introduction of Islam. Belz explains that most diplomats and military commanders "assumed [Christianity] was an import of British colonial rule or an invention of American evangelicals" (15).

In the last third of the *Infidels*, "Inside the House of War," Belz describes the out-and-out war on Christians. She introduces ISIS leader Baghdadi through his attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, October 2010, in which 58 were murdered and 75 were wounded in a horrific four-hour siege (178). This evil, seen as insanity by most, is described by Baghdadi as "pure Islam." More "pure Islam": In March 2013, the Islamist al-Nusra group (later folded into ISIS) seized Raqqa, Syria. According to a UN fact finding mission, children were "killed or publicly executed, crucified, beheaded, and stoned to death."

Infidels tracks the flight of Christians and others on the early morning in June 2014 when ISIS seized Mosul. Iraqi soldiers abandoned their posts and shed their uniforms, leaving residents defenseless. ISIS killed on the spot Christians who did not leave or pay the enormous fine (*jizyah*) imposed on infidels. Hundreds of thousands fled, leaving homes, businesses, *everything* behind. One Christian told Belz, "We have lived in Mosul and had a civilization for thousands of years and suddenly some strangers came and expelled us from our homes" (219). Belz writes, "The Christians suspected that their Muslim neighbors had actually shown ISIS the way to Christian homes—and no one in the army or police had come to help them" (220).

A few months later ISIS took Sinjar, home to Yezidis, kidnapping boys to serve as fighters and taking girls to sell as sex slaves. Forty thousand people, mostly Yezidis, but also Christians, fled to the top of Mt. Sinjar where they were trapped by ISIS with no food, water, or shelter. Before the U.S. helicopter rescue efforts, 7,000 Yezidis and Christians were dead on Mt. Sinjar, and 500 girls were taken as sex slaves. Women, girls, and even tiny children were raped by ISIS. Some killed themselves to escape that horror, and others pleaded for the United States to "bomb them" so they could die. Belz revisits Christians and Yezidis, traumatized by murder, rape, or kidnapping, forced to flee again and again.

Christians formed Assyrian militias to assist their rescue. "It's not acceptable to watch our lands taken by terrorist groups and expect Kurds to come to liberate them, and we just watch while Kurds fight. It's our land and our people, so we have to be active," Odisho Yousif told Belz (258).

Though Iraqi Christians receive scant help through official channels, Belz says American, British, and other war veterans fight alongside

them. "The foreign fighters were a hodgepodge of Christians, atheists, and the religiously indifferent," she says. "What they had in common was a conviction that the United States and its allies owed something to the Iraqis and that they themselves had watched too long from the sidelines, waiting on the West to act" (261).

Before the end of summer 2014, ISIS was the richest terrorist group in the world, with some $500 billion in resources, and the world had disregarded the jihadists while they conquered one-third of Iraq with 30,000 militants. Infidels demands, "Why? Given the millions of dollars and thousands of lives the West had invested: the American veterans who had suffered injuries and sacrificed their limbs to IEDs, who were still living with their own trauma, only to see a more lasting, more widely traumatic destruction unfold" (221).

Infidels could be an extremely depressing, despair-filled story. But it is no such thing. The power of Belz's book comes from the power of the Middle East Church. Belz demonstrates how the same God for whom Middle East Christians are willing to die sustains them in the midst of their suffering. Their faith remains strong; they receive help and support from local churches to which they flee; they are uniting and working together as never before. Belz was amazed by the resilience and courage of Middle East Christians like Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf, Syriac Archbishop of Mosul. Sharaf, one of the last to leave Mosul, declared, "They take everything from us, but they cannot take the God from our hearts—they cannot" (220).

Bishop Antoine Audo, in Aleppo, the head of the Chaldean Church in Syria and Bible translator told Belz it was important for Eastern churches to remain in the Middle East and "have a presence of Christians with Muslim people." He said he was doing his duty as a witness, "showing the presence of the Lord, and serving him with joy" (165).

Father Ragheed Ganni of Mosul Church of the Holy Spirit was martyred in 2007 along with three deacons. Ganni had written, "We empathize with Christ, who entered Jerusalem in full knowledge that the consequence of His love for mankind was the cross. Thus, while bullets smashed our church windows, we offered our suffering as a sign of love for Christ. This is war, real war, but we hope to carry our cross to the very end with the help of Divine Grace" (161-2).

Belz reflects:

> I tried to fathom the depths of Christian solidarity, watching these believers find water in this desert... Caring for displaced families when they first arrived was one thing, but it was another to help them six months, one year, or eighteen months later. The long years of war and persecution preceding the invasion of ISIS had trained some muscle reflex, only instead of it moving their hands away from the fiery flame, it moved them toward it—and toward one another. (291)

There is opportunity, Belz points out, for American Christians to bring good out of evil. One Indiana church raised $60,000 to pay six months' rent for 80 families at the Erbil hotel in Iraqi Kurdistan, where many Christians have fled to escape ISIS.. And Iraqi pastor Yusuf Matti could use help setting up schools for Yazidi, Muslim, and Christian children. "Multiply the resources of churches in the United States against so simple a need," Belz says, "and American Christians could make a real difference in the lives of ISIS victims" (280).

As Belz concludes, she says the Christians "confronted face-to-face and door-to-door by ISIS had run, yes, but they had run only when to stay meant giving up their faith. The sublime, nearly forgotten reality in all their hardship and loss was this: In losing everything, they had held on to the one thing that mattered to them most" (295).

But for the Syrian Orthodox monks of Mar Matti, a 4th century monastery only 12 miles from Mosul, included in what matters most is to stay. Head monk, Yousif Ibrahim, told Belz that as long as any Christians were left in Iraq, "A shepherd cannot leave his sheep." The monastery, one of the only cultural sites not ravaged by ISIS, is defended by a special unit of the Peshmerga Kurdish military and inhabited now by three courageous monks and six students. The ongoing warfare is clearly visible from atop Mar Matti's Mt. Alfaf. Ibrahim told Belz, "The sky lights up at night, but we of course are not scared. God protects us" (266-67).

Regardless of their suffering and death, regardless of their bewildered disappointment with a silent West and a silent Western Church, *Infidels* demonstrates that Middle East Christians are confident in the love of the God they serve and for whom they have sacrificed all. Together, they have strategic importance in His Sovereign plan. P

Faith McDonnell is the Director of Religious Liberty Programs and of the Church Alliance for a New Sudan at the Institute on Religion & Democracy.