

AFTER SATURDAY, COMES SUNDAY

"Are you saying that Assad is NOT the biggest problem in Syria?"

"Yes, I am."

"WOW."

So I took up her book and read. I'm still thinking about it! The book almost needs to carry a 'WARNING: READERS' ADVISORY'. It is not for the weak-minded (or the faint-hearted).



I heard Elizabeth Kendal speak at a conference in Melbourne over Christmas. Articulate. Informed. Passionate. Impressive. She is a 'religious liberty analyst and advocate' (www.elizabethkendal.com).

I can be consumed by this desperation to understand what is happening around the world, particularly with regards to my Christian sisters and brothers. When Elizabeth gave me a copy of her book, [After Saturday Comes Sunday](#), with its subtitle, 'Understanding the Christian Crisis in the Middle East', I thought to myself, "I'm in - I am going to make time for this book." Within a few paragraphs her intent is made clear: 'eliminating the ignorance, unraveling the confusion, and dispelling the hopelessness' (xv). I stuck with her the whole way.

The title comes from an old Arabic war cry. 'As sure as Saturday (the day of Jewish worship) is followed by Sunday (the day of Christian worship), first we'll kill the Jews, then we'll kill the Christians' (1). Chapter 1 shows how this is *exactly* what has happened in the original heartland of Christianity (Iraq & Syria).

What did I find helpful?

1. Kendal gives me a different perspective. I love pushing myself to see things from a different angle. Take the All Blacks. I prefer to read the British and Australian press, rather than the jingoistic, sycophantic NZ press! Take the Arab Spring. The Western narrative is one where the masses rise up in popular revolutions desiring Western-style democracies. 'This narrative is complete and utter rubbish' (108) - and Kendal demonstrates why this is the case. The West is overwhelmed by a naive and 'what they failed to appreciate was that *who falls* was far less important than *who rises*' (117). In reality, the Arab Spring has nothing to do with democracy. Long before 'post-truth' ever emerged, I had become deeply cynical about perspectives streaming from places like the media and the university. Kendal has done nothing to ease my troubled soul.

2. Kendal sides with the church. God knows that nobody else is doing so... Kendal is all about standing in solidarity with Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East. That is what drives this book. This is the priority for me and it should be the priority for the global church. Doing whatever it takes to keep oil pipelines flowing should not be a factor for us. 'The Christians of the Middle East need all the help they can get' (xv). Christians here are 'in an existential struggle for their very survival as a people

in their own historic homeland' (124). It is a genocide that is going on. 'Christians are being targeted, and not merely for persecution, subjugation, and exploitation - but for elimination!' (213). As one Patriarch in the church expresses it, 'the Western world is not only indifferent, it is an accomplice' (211). The sense of betrayal felt by Christians in the Middle East as they look towards countries like the USA that they would expect to be supportive of their cause is shamefully sobering.

3. Kendal has done her homework. Not since Philip Jenkins' have I read someone who offers so much in helping me find a pathway through the complexities of this context. Forgive me for an extended quotation, but here is an example of what I mean:

A century of Western hegemony has come to an end, and the West, having overturned the balance-of-power dynamic that existed through much of the twentieth century, is now in the process of departing the arena. It leaves behind a complex and multi-layered struggle through which regional forces are staking their claims, securing their interests and advancing their agendas.

One layer of this struggle involves the region's three imperialistic powers which are competing for territory and influence: ascendant Iran versus the Arabs (led by Saudi Arabia) versus neo-Ottoman Turkey.

Another layer involves the seemingly eternal struggle between the region's two Islamic sects: the Sunnis versus the Shi'ites.

Yet another layer involves the region's two political axes: the east-west, Iran-led, Shi'ite-dominated Shia Axis or Axis of Resistance (comprising Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah and other "resistance" groups such as Hamas) versus the north-south, Turkey-Arab-Sunni Axis (which itself is split between pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood factions). The fact that Russia backs Damascus while the US backs its Sunni allies merely adds fuel to the fire.

Rising up like a mushroom cloud in the midst of the chaos - indeed, exploiting and feeding on the chaos to advance its own ends (as is its modus operandi) - is the global movement of transnational jihadism. This movement - which is committed to establishing a caliphate in the heart of the Middle East from where it will wage jihad against the West - has now split into two mutually hostile factions: the pragmatic, pro-resistance al-Qaeda versus the inflexible, anti-Shi'ite IS. While the transnational jihadist element adds another layer to the conflict, it also transcends it while infecting every other layer (19).

There you have it. How helpful are those five paragraphs?! But there is so much more to help me understand. The Sunni:Shia divide makes my head hurt - and Kendal helps me out. Anyone else get annoyed with how Western education thinks that the history of the Middle East started with the Crusades? Quoting historian Thomas Madden (and countering the Robin Hood narrative, while still making Jesus wince, I'm sure):

The Crusades were not the brainchild of an ambitious pope or rapacious knights but a response to more than four centuries of conquests in which Muslims had already captured two-thirds of the old Christian world. At some point, Christianity as a faith and culture had to defend itself or be subsumed by Islam. The Crusades were that defense (45).

For me the most riveting part of the book was the story which she places alongside the *successful* Iranian (Shi'ite) revolution in 1979. The siege of Mecca (68-78), a *failed* Sunni revolution in Saudi Arabia. It happened at the same time. Where is the movie?! Some Islamic clerics end up snookering the king and the House of Saud and secure from him 'an unlimited flow of Saudi petro-dollars with which to spread intolerant, pro-Sharia, pro-jihad, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian, Wahhabi Islam right across the globe' (77) ... all the time being protected by 'a US security umbrella' (80). Go figure.

[NB: I'll never forget driving to Phoenix airport with an Arab friend and an Iranian taxi-driver. I didn't understand a word of their extended and animated conversation ... but then, after awhile my friend turns to me with a pithy summary of their chat, "He is saying that Saudi is the mother of all the problems in the Middle East" - to which my friend then adds, "and the father, too"].

Yes, the US (and the EU, the UK, the UN - and U and I, too) don't look so good in this book. How is it that they can be such tight allies with the very country that sponsors jihadism? Duh?! Isn't it obvious? Oil. Economy. The days of seeing any enemy of the Soviet Union as their friend may be over - but what about the lessons learned from the alarming number of those friends who then became enemies?! Hmmm. At one point Kendal compares the speeches at the UN from Obama and Putin in September 2015:

Obama sang the the Turkey-Arab song, insisting that the Syrian government is the problem ... (a song that) is nothing but propaganda designed to hide geopolitical ambitions behind a veneer of humanitarianism ... Obama must be condemned for his selective indignation (220) [ie where is his condemnation of Saudi Arabia?!]. Putin's response was '*a superb and rational rebuttal*' (221) - and she quotes a lot of it.

4. Kendal takes me to Syria. Before you join the chorus of support for bombing in retaliation for use of chemical warfare that kills babies, you really should read 'Myth Busting the Syrian Crisis' (123-142) and weigh her argument carefully. I don't know if she has it exactly right, but she has my attention. She makes sense. She lists some of the 'myths' around which the Western narrative about Syria is built:

- (a) Assad has limited support.
- (b) Syria is isolated.
- (c) The Syrian crisis is driven by an evil murderous regime that is murdering its own people and is guilty of crimes against humanity.
- (d) The support given by America, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to those opposing Assad is driven by humanitarianism and a devotion to human rights.

She disagrees with each one of these assertions. That takes some doing! For her the desire for regime change has little to do with human rights or pictures of babies dying from chemical weapons. Rather it is all about the battle for *regional* power and it is a battle for control over oil/energy supply lines.

In gathering her argument, Kendal introduces the reader to 'asymmetric warfare' (130-136). This is warfare between unequal forces - one weak, one strong - but warfare in which the weak prevails over the strong. This is the war that terrorists wage, for example. They use different strategies to do so. One is the use of *psyops*, or, 'psychological operations'. Be it the way language is used (for example,

whether you use the word 'regime' or 'government' makes a big difference) and propaganda. Another is the use of human shields (for example, jihadists establishing their bases next to hospitals and kindergartens). Then there is the use of 'false flags' (wearing your enemy's uniform, for example).

While powers weak and strong have learned to play this game, it seems the masses are yet to catch on ... Like the public in general, most journalists are appallingly ignorant of history, religion and how asymmetric warfare works. This needs to change. Instead of just parroting and amplifying propaganda - be it acquired from shady 'local sources' or an official press conference, journalists must be independent thinkers, discerning investigators, and truth seekers. They must double and triple check their 'facts', to ensure that they and the public to whom they report are not being duped, manipulated and exploited (136).

5. Kendal offers some practical steps. [Mind you, providing new understanding is immensely practical in and of itself]. A couple of Appendices - on Christian Solidarity and on being God's Human Instruments - are useful. I am going to read her Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin regularly (rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com.au).

Even as a timid chap, I am going to keep asking God for the courage to travel to difficult countries and offer the simple solidarity of friendship to those I encounter. This Easter especially I am going to have Kendal's words in my heart - 'Just as the deadly cross of Friday extinguished life, the deathly silence of Saturday devoured hope (228) - and then rejoice in the Resurrection we associate with Sunday and deepen the intensity of my longing for The Day and what it will mean for Christians in the Middle East.

6. Kendal leaves me with an image. I love images. We should all know by now that the 'blood of martyrs is the seed of the church' is a bit of nonsense because in most situations 'the blood of martyrs simply sank into the sands' (237). Kendal loves her garden and writes of the value of 'blood and bone' (fertilizer). Keep scattering the seed of the gospel and then it is the blood of martyrs, together with 'the sweat of labourers and the tears of intercessors working (together) like irrigation' (237) that helps prepare the soil for that seed.

What we need is more sweat and more tears: more sacrificial giving, more intelligent strategic advocacy, more passionate intercessory prayer, and, of course, more urgent and intentional scattering of the seed (237-238).

I am not enough of an expert to know if everything Elizabeth Kendal writes is accurate. My hunch is that she is mostly right. My conviction is that my engagement with the Middle East will never be the same again. Thank-you.

nice chatting

Paul

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<http://paulwindsor.blogspot.com.au/2017/04/after-saturday-comes-sunday.html>