



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 19 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Jerusalem

October 2, 2018: the trip begins with no theme or mission, except to reach the Holy Land. Stops along the way are mostly planned: Iceland, Copenhagen and Kiev. I don't have a ticket home yet, so there may be one more destination on the way back.

I don't have a book to begin the trip with either, having just finished a summer project that involved reading 25 books, mostly esoteric, acquired from the personal library of a deceased psychotherapist. I'll look for one tomorrow in Reykjavik, but I'm considering giving up this part of my modus operandi, especially given the nature of the 25-book project which was to summarize what I learned without including a single quotation from the 750 excerpts I gleaned. On the verge of my 65th birthday, I'm thinking the role of an official elder may be more to impart than to absorb.

Just before I leave, wondering what I'm going to do with two hours to kill in the airport, I scour my bookshelves in vain. I end up taking the tiny, never-read Gideon's New Testament that has been beside my bed so long I don't remember where it came from. Maybe this is all I will read on this trip.

With the help of some over-the-counter pills, I manage to half-sleep through the entire four-and-a-half-hour overnight flight to Iceland. It's cold and pitch-black when I arrive at my hotel at 6:30 in the morning of Day 1. I begin with a good hotel buffet breakfast, then cross the road to walk the path beside the sea to the center of Reykjavik. It's 3 degrees Celsius and won't get much warmer today.

The walk is very nice with two photogenic sculptures along the way and my first glimpses of the neat and colorful Legoland-type architecture of Reykjavik. The greyness at 64 degrees latitude is noticeable, this being the most northern capital in the world, sitting just below the Arctic Circle. It's a small city (122,000 souls) so I expect everything will be easy to find or fall upon. I will spend most of the day walking.

No luck finding anything at Bokin, the messy used bookstore on my list, then I fall asleep for a few moments in a regular bookstore/café, and finally for quite a while in Hallgrímskirkja, the fantastical National Cathedral on a hill in the center of town, rousing myself now and then when I start to sink too low in the pew or list sideways. Once outside again, there's an icy rain, the wind has picked up, and it feels colder with even a few tiny snowflakes blowing about. I survive Day 1 and manage to stay awake till ten. The next two days will be spent on a tour bus, exploring the countryside.

I sleep well and wake up refreshed on Day 2. I still have nothing to read and don't feel like reading the New Testament. Waiting at the entrance to the hotel for the tour bus, it sinks in where I am and I know I will see some amazing things today in this unique and very young (only 60 million years old) country.

The bus has to first pass over some small, snow-covered mountains heading east. There are geothermal plants everywhere, huge clouds of steam rising out of the earth. The scenery from the bus is strange and wonderful, but not being able to stop and take photos is frustrating. Maybe I should have rented a car. The guide on the bus explains that Iceland sits on the junction of two tectonic plates, the North American and Eurasian, which explains why it has over thirty active volcanoes. All its heat is geothermal with the ubiquitous waterfalls supplying hydroelectricity. It's the most sparsely populated country in Europe, with 350,000 inhabitants.



First stop involves a short hike to a glacier with an unpronounceable name. The wind is literally breath-taking. Walking above the river fed by the melting glacier, I can hear one particularly large chunk of ancient blue ice creaking as it floats slowly downriver.

Back in the bus, the landscapes outside look quiet and empty. The guide says the arctic fox is the only native mammal, with mice and minks coming later, brought by settlers, and one lonely herd of reindeer left over from another failed attempt to import wildlife. No mosquitos and no cockroaches, but lots of sheep and horse farms.

The little country's history is as interesting as the landscapes. The Icelandic Sagas are some of the greatest stories ever told, and the political fabric of the country was unique: their parliament, founded in 930 shortly after the Viking settlers arrived, is the oldest one in the world.

By the time we get to the turnaround point of the tour, the village Vik, the sun has come out and there's enough blue in the sky to think maybe it might linger a while. We are given some time to wander around the town and down to the huge waves on the beach. Eating a sandwich bought in the local supermarket, it feels strange not to have a book to read; I'll focus on planning instead, especially for the Holy Land.

After lunch we visit Reynisfjara Black Sand Beach where the guide warns us about powerful "sneaker waves" that come out of nowhere to swallow the odd tourist, and then two waterfalls where it's so windy the water is mostly moving sideways. It's been a good day, especially for the camera. Must thank the weather gods.

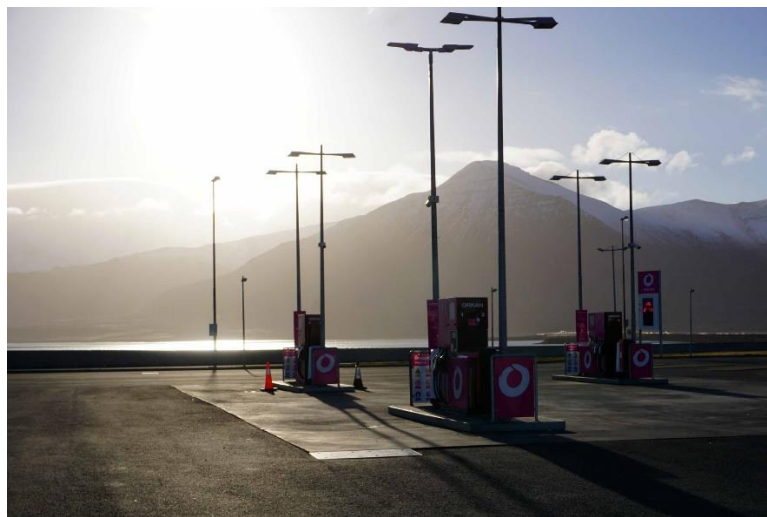
Day 3 begins with another day-trip, this time north to the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. The forecast is mainly sunny and I plan to make the most of it because tomorrow and the next day could be very grey and wet.

I luck out and get the front seat of the tour bus, just above and behind the driver, with a fantastic view straight ahead through his enormous windshield. There's a diagonal crack that runs down the entire window I will need to Photoshop out of two photos later. The first stop is for coffee and bathrooms at a gas station/restaurant where the early morning sun is shining brightly on the bay across the road.





Vik



At the next stop, I get a couple of stunning shots of small mountains behind a lake with the sun pouring through holes in the clouds to create a dappled effect on the landscape. Then, after much more driving, we eventually stop for lunch at another village with an unpronounceable name, not far from more scenic falls. I get some nice shots wandering around the town during the break. The sky is mostly mixed white and grey but with interesting purple and blue hues.

Soon after we hit the road again, the day turns spectacular and by the time we reach the Black Beach near the glacier-capped volcano that was the scene of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, our tour guide is telling us how rare it is to see the top which is usually shrouded in clouds attracted by the heat of the crater.

The name of the volcano is Snaefellsjokull and our guide says that some consider it to be the heart chakra of the planet, to which you can make a wish: *My name is so-and-so and I am open to meeting the love of my life*, is what you're supposed to say. The area between the mountain and the sea was where aliens were supposedly going to land on November 5, 1993. Hundreds of people gathered, most in tents, to greet them, but they never showed up, apparently put off by the partying humans. People still expect they will eventually pop up in this magical place which has become a New Age mecca.

I like the guide on this bus much better than yesterday's. She's full of information and plays interesting Icelandic music on the sound system when she's not talking. Iceland is one of only two countries (the other being Costa Rica) with no military. Only 1.3% of the island is covered in trees, 10% in glaciers. The countryside is teeming with trolls and leprechauns that locals refer to as the huldenfolk (hidden people).

At our last official stop, we linger for quite a while in the village of Arnarstapi, with its giant statue of a half-man-half-troll made of balanced stones. There's also an incredible cliff-walk with scenery to die for on this spectacular day. I get some nice shots at this last scheduled stop and a couple more of yet another waterfall at an unscheduled stop at Holy Mountain on the long ride back to Reykjavik.

My room at the Hotel Cabin could hardly be smaller, forcing me to edit photos in the small common room on my floor. It's been another good day for me and the camera.



Mt. Kirkjufell



Snaefellsjokul



Arnarstapi



Arnarstapi



Arnarstapi



Arnarstapi

The forecast couldn't be much worse for Day 4: rain, heavy winds and maybe even a bit of snow. I'll stay indoors as much as possible, visit two museums, and hopefully find a book to read in dry, quiet places. Getting to the center of town is easy in this small city – just follow the path along the sea until you see the jagged spire of Hallgrímskirkja, then walk up any street towards it. I'll remember this walk fondly; I would love to live in a place with a path beside the sea. I find two books on the mark-down table of Eymundsson Books: *The Battle for Home: Memoir of a Syrian Architect*, by Marwa al-Sabouni, and *Orwell on Truth*, a recently published collection of excerpts.

The cold gets to me after two hours of wandering and I take refuge in the Culture House, one of the two museums I want to visit today. It's small but nice (and warm) and I end up spending an hour in a small room with photo books of this beautiful, enchanting country, a country overflowing with nature's art. I might never need to travel with my camera if I lived here.

There's a large, well-appointed reading room on an upper floor with an old library card catalogue which is now used by visitors who are asked to write their names on file-cards and place them in the proper drawer in alphabetical order. After a career working in libraries, I've finally made it into the catalogue.

Next up is a film at the local art-house cinema, the Bio Paradis. The film I want to see, part of the Reykjavik International Film Festival, is *Happy as Lazzaro*, by a young Italian film director, Alice Rohrwacher. It's a wonderful film with just the right amount of magical realism, creating its own distinct time and space, an alternate reality that doesn't actually look other-worldly. I love this part of travelling, experiencing a film like this in the context of being in a foreign place, a film that creates its own world. Like going down a rabbit-hole within a rabbit-hole.

Walking home in the rain and wind - so windy I can't hold an umbrella - is discouraging, but now the forecast for tomorrow, my last day in this strange land, includes a couple of hours of sunny breaks. Hope!

In the evening I start the Marwa al-Sabouni book, not sure how it could (or whether or I should try to make it) fit in with this trip. Marwa is a young architect from Homs, Syria's third largest city. Her contention is that "we are what we build" and "architectural choices can determine questions of identity and home." It wasn't easy becoming an architect in a country mired in corruption and bureaucracy before the civil war, where she often "felt stuck in time and space,

waiting for nothing to happen... jailed behind the bars of nothingness.” Then, she is forced to witness her country “collapse from a state of civilization to a nightmare of animal carnage.”

For Marwa, the war is an occasion to “reflect on the importance of the role architecture plays in our destinies.” What she calls “sectarian urbanism” – the construction of huge, ugly apartment blocks where people tend to divide along sectarian lines, had a lot to do with the conflict. “Urban and architectural vandalism, along with divisive sectarianism, corruption and narrow-mindedness, all dragged Homs down to rock bottom.”

I sleep in a bit on Day 5 after a night full of dreams. In the most memorable, my father, a devout atheist, dead for 56 years, is walking to church with me and a group of other old men. They’re dawdling and I fear we are going to be late on a day when I need to be early because I have duties to perform. I race ahead of the old guys and when I get to the church, it’s been renovated. Long tables have replaced the pews, to celebrate the occasion with a dinner, but there aren’t many seats still unoccupied, except for a few behind huge pillars with no view of the altar. The altar looks very different now: it has no backdrop and opens to a large intensely bright white room instead. Left of the altar is a thrift shop, with coats and handbags on big steel racks, an addition that seems ugly and inappropriate at first glance.

It’s Sunday and I’m planning to attend an English mass at Christ the King Church later in the day at 6:30. It’s drizzling rain when I leave the hotel but at least there’s no gale-force winds to contend with, so I can use my umbrella if necessary.

Just as predicted, the sun eventually comes out (sort of) for two hours of wandering around the center of town. When it clouds over again, I find the National Museum and the first thing I see when I walk in is a rusty Viking sword. Then the sun suddenly reappears and there’s more blue sky than ever in Reykjavik, so it’s back outside to walk some more, first around Tjornin Lake, then slowly back up to Hallgrimskirkja where I buy my 1,000 Krona (\$11) ticket for the tower and make it up just in time to get a few shots of the city before the sun disappears again. After all this running about, it’s time for another church nap downstairs.

Afterwards, I read a little Marwa before leaving my pew. She says Homs had had a history of peaceful coexistence and wasn't always divided into sectarian neighborhoods. People naturally interacted, especially in the Old Souk (the market) where "everyone had to know each other's names, greet each other at every encounter, and share businesses and benefits, simply because that is the best way to do business, and more importantly because their religions told them so." The tradition was for shopkeepers to sit outside their shops until they made their first sale. Shopkeepers who had already made a sale would direct customers to one of their fellow merchants until everyone had made a sale.

Out the front door of the church and down the main street, I find a tiny restaurant selling the Icelandic Street Dog, a large hot dog dressed with sweet mustard and crispy fried onions that hits the spot. Then it's back to the National Museum for some Viking history. The dream image of the bright white space behind the altar lingers and I wonder what Christ the King will look like.

After an hour on my feet in the museum, I need to sit down for another nap. When I open my eyes and start to gather my things, the camera drops from my lap and bounces off the ceramic-tiled floor. I turn it on, hoping no damage has been done, but the camera refuses to recognize its lens. I try everything, taking it on and off several times, and it works only once before I get the same *Camera cannot detect lens* message that the Web will later describe as "fatal". This poses a serious problem because I decided not to bring a backup camera on this trip.









I arrive thirty minutes early at Christ the King where the church is already half-filled with Filipino ladies reciting the Rosary before the service. The mass itself will be almost unbearable, with a screaming toddler drowning out whatever is being droned by a listless priest. There's far too much hymn singing, rote and magic smoke too, and at one point the priest walks up and down the aisles sprinkling everyone with magic water. If this were the only church available, I would never attend. Before I leave, I say a prayer for my camera – that it will somehow wake up and recognize its lens.

The mass and being without a camera leave me in a dark mood. It's night already and walking home on a busy street, looking at menus in restaurant windows advertising dinners for outrageous prices, two activists wearing hoodies, Guy Fawkes masks and all-black are standing back-to-back holding video screens against their chests playing images of the torture we inflict on the animals we kill for food.

After eating a (vegetarian!) sandwich purchased in a supermarket, the darkness continues into sleep and I have some pretty nasty dreams in the night. In one, I'm watching a film which, like the Italian film I saw yesterday, detaches from reality more and more as it moves along, and at a certain point one of the characters starts to kill everyone else one-by-one. Except for me. The demon spares me.

I wake up on Day 6 thirty minutes before my alarm but don't return for any more dreams, in a dark mood and actually wishing I was home, something that rarely happens on the road. I can't eat any of the meat at the breakfast buffet and wonder for the thousandth time if now is the time to go vegetarian.

Is it the broken camera that's brought on this darkness? Or is it the dream of the bright white space behind the altar? The dream was by no means a nightmare but there was something deeply unsettling about the space. Maybe it's just the lack of light this far north, raising subconscious anxiety that the sun is abandoning us. I'm sure I'd get used to the uneasy feeling of a lower sun if I lived here; it's probably what people who move to Canada from warmer climes feel – a subtle but persistent sensation of being in the wrong place. I need something good and bright to happen today. The shuttle to the airport for my flight to Copenhagen is easy and, as usual, I'm inside with three hours to spare.



Hallgrímskirkja

Marwa's book is very dark too: there seem to be no traces of light in a story about how low humans can go. She says when the European colonizers came, communities in the Arab world began to regard their own styles as unsophisticated compared to the West. Styles of dress and architecture (and the beauty and wisdom inherent in them) were dumped for something foreign. "The result has been a kind of universal schizophrenia." Concrete apartment blocks replaced traditional housing. The blocks were ugly, without character and uncongenial, an architectural failing that contributed to the eruption of civil war.

She says religion was not the cause of the civil war: "On the contrary. When religions were truly embraced within communities, it was religion that radiated affection, respect and compassion" between the different groups. Rather, it's a fear of losing one's identity, stimulated by having to live in sectarian concrete barracks that fuel tension.

There's a bad taste lingering from the cultish mass yesterday. Even the Gospel was dark and depressing: Jesus saying divorce is not permitted and the priest reading a pronouncement by a long-dead pope on the matter that recommends a family pray the Rosary together, a strategy he says can even work in a mixed-religion marriage. So hopelessly, abysmally irrelevant.

The plane is packed, and I didn't pay extra for seat selection, so I'm crammed up against a window. An older German man is leaning over the person in the aisle seat talking to the lady in the middle seat who looks to be his wife. I figure they weren't able to get adjacent seats, so I offer to trade with him if he has an aisle seat. He jumps at the suggestion and leads me to his assigned seat which turns out to be in business class! His stroke of luck turns out to be mine – bumped into a whole other world of air travel.

I sense the rich guy next to me is a bit pissed off at my good fortune, but that only makes it sweeter. I will have a smile on my face for the entire three-hour flight: big, wide seat, leg-room to spare, real headphones, a delicious leg of duck meal and unlimited wine! Just what I needed. For the first time ever, I'm disappointed when landing begins with the order to remove headphones and I miss the last ten minutes of a good movie.

Getting to my hotel from Copenhagen Airport couldn't be easier: just three stops on a \$7 train and a five-minute walk from Central Station. I spend the evening looking for cheap food, walking around the neighborhood dominated by the famous Tivoli Gardens just down the street. I have no luck finding a supermarket, but the location of my hotel is great. Yesterday's camera prayer didn't work, so I'll pray for good dreams tonight and hit the camera shops first thing in the morning.

So much trouble falling asleep, but the prayer is answered and there are no bad dreams. I'm off to a late start on a cloudy Day 7 - on a quest to fix my camera. The two shops I found on the Web are within reasonable walking distance, but I get lost several times on winding streets. This is a very European city with no right angles permitted, so I'm never sure where I am or which direction I'm heading. When you ask someone for directions (everyone seems to speak English) the answer is always "it's very close", followed by a list of ten or fifteen instructions on how to find the place "just around the corner." I know the drill: walk around in circles until the swirls and squares begin to etch themselves into your unconscious and somehow you find what you're looking for.

I do eventually find the shops where I'm assisted by extremely nice (as everyone seems to be here) people and the problem is solved with the purchase of a new lens, leaving me \$500 poorer but back in business. There's a slight cloud cover now with soft light and shadows – not very good for photos, but when I finally find picturesque Nyhavn (just around the corner) after thirty minutes of circling, the sun intensifies just enough to get a good post-cardy shot of the boats and various-colored waterfront buildings with a dark-sky background.

I spend the rest of the afternoon walking, all the way out to the former squat settlement of Freetown Christiania and back, already getting some sense of the city. In the evening I spend two hours on the Web looking for a way home and finally decide that Israel will be my last stop: four parts to a trip is enough. After nineteen expensive days of travel, my flight home from Tel Aviv will ironically have a four-hour layover in Iceland.



Nyhavn





Day 8 looks like it will be sunny throughout, with a full slate of destinations planned. I finish Marwa before I leave. She says terrible crimes were committed in the civil war “not in the name of religion as some might like to think, but because of political alignments that relied on identity labelling.” When urban development divides “people into separate sectors, they find a way to identify the enemy instantly in any conflict.” If the war ever ends, architecture will be an important part of the healing process, she says, and “it is not in the interests of the West that the Middle East becomes so uninhabitable that the entire population moves to Europe, bringing with it the chaos of identity politics.”

First stop is Kastellet, the star-shaped 17th-century fortress park where I get some nice shots in brilliant light. The famous Little Mermaid is nearby, surrounded by a swarm of tourists, so I take the obligatory shot. Then it's another long walk to Rosenborg Castle and Gardens, after which I head back to my hotel to rest, visiting the Book Trader on the way but finding nothing, too tired to search very hard. For some reason, today I find the scent of used books a bit off-putting. The age-worn enlarged photos of William S. Burroughs and Ken Kesey visiting the shop in the eighties, the Beat books, the ancient owner sitting in a chair leafing through his acquisitions are so reminiscent of all the used bookstores I've visited over the years in so many other places, I just want to leave and step back into the sunshine of the present day. I'll come back tomorrow.

I'm completely out of gas and never make it back to the hotel, taking a long break in a Burger King, knowing I've already covered most of the places on my list but needing to take advantage of the good weather. I continue to walk for the rest of the afternoon, then in the evening finalize plans for the last six days in Israel: four in Jerusalem and the final two in Tel Aviv. Feeling a bit lonely, I realize I haven't had a real conversation yet on this trip, but at least there have been no more bad dreams. I buy a 24-hour public transportation pass for tomorrow.

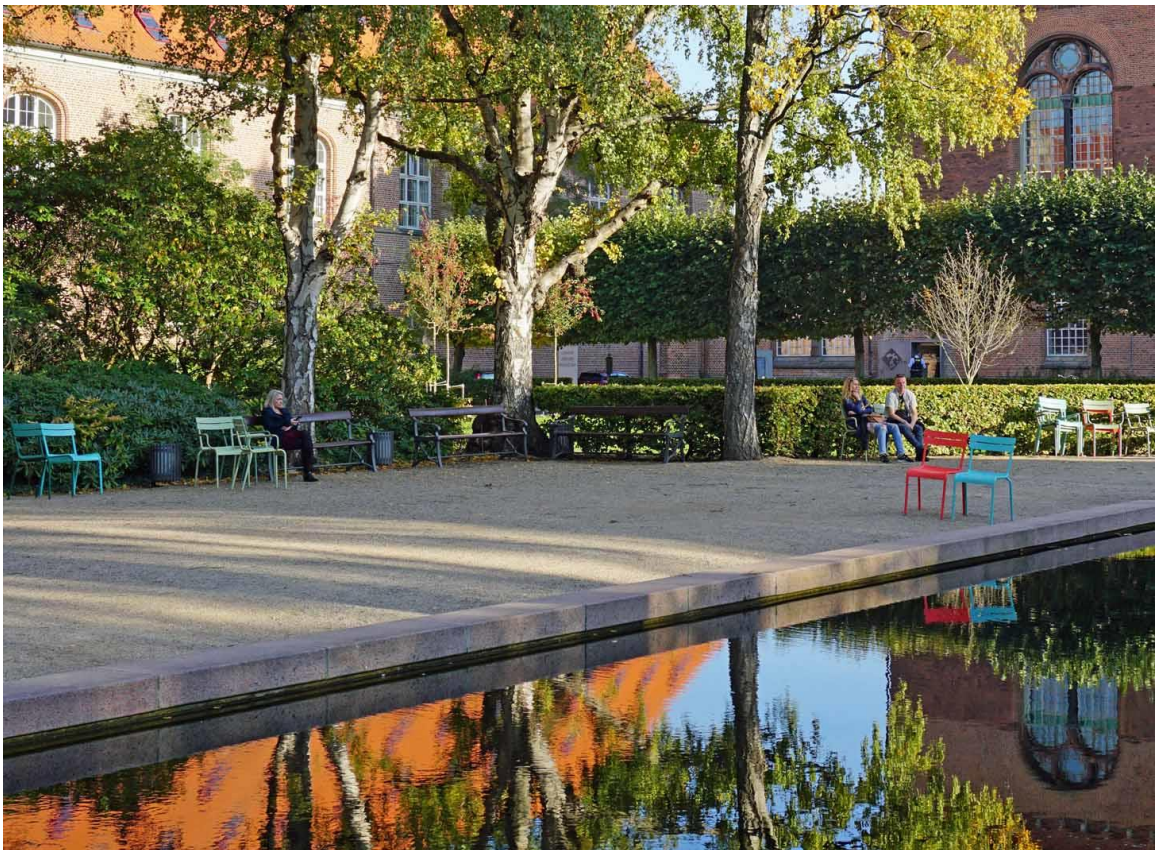
I make the mistake of looking at some news on the Web in the morning of Day 9. Things are getting more disturbing every day. A lunatic is running the world and, like a first weed in a garden, the pestilence is spreading, and lunatics are popping up everywhere. And worse than the lunatics are the profoundly stupid people who embrace them, especially the hateful, racist and murderous, happier than pigs in shit with the present state of affairs, revelling in the growing darkness. Syria can happen anywhere.



Kastellet







My flight to Kiev leaves at nine tonight, which gives me almost a whole third day here, and the plan today is to begin with a bus ride to Grundtvig's Church. The bus passes through a rough neighborhood where, unlike in the city center where almost everyone looks the same, there are people of color, lots of young girls with hijabs, and a few elderly working-class white people who look a little forgotten.

The doors are just being opened when I reach Grundtvig's. The Expressionist church, with rows of matching houses on each side, is stunning and empty. It's nice to linger alone in such a quiet, majestic place. So simple and unadorned, compared to Catholic churches. No images at all, and just a simple 24-inch cross on the altar. I get a nice shot through open doors with bright light pouring through the windows behind the altar, almost as bright as in my dream.

I take a long break on a pew to begin the Orwell book. Orwell was a genuine socialist who warned against the totalitarianism of both the right and the left. He describes the regressive liberals of his day as: "that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking towards the smell of 'progress' like bluebottles to a dead cat."

The cemetery across the road is enchanting in the morning light, full of grey-black crows and red squirrels. Cemetery silence is made even sweeter by the sounds of children laughing and shouting in what must be an adjacent schoolyard: recess sounds of joy and momentary freedom that are exactly the same the world over, not a single word discernable. I get a nice shot of a multi-colored bench covered in dew with barely visible rays of sunlight pouring down on it.

I experience my first perfect moment of detachment on this trip that so far has had an edge of underlying anxiety, possibly carried over from the aftermath of the 25-book project which, among other things, left me feeling more than ever before the reality of death. I need to keep reminding myself that I'm going to the Holy Land, a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the ultimate pilgrimage. And not to think about how expensive this trip is.



Grundtvig's Church



Bispebjerg Cemetery



I take another break on a bench with the pointed top of Grundtvig's Church visible behind the trees. I think about the bright white light again and what it might mean. A church with a banquet underway and a thrift shop. Maybe the dream is saying to look past the business and social aspects of the church to the real reason it exists: to understand and make peace with the transcendent – death.

Frederick Slot (a generic castle-museum) and the Elephant Gate (under renovation) on the other side of town are a bust, so I take a train back to Central Station where I have my first sit-down meal in this city. The Orwell book is a short and easy read that could have been written today. He says people without jobs or on the verge of destitution “may be actually relieved to hear of the approaching end of civilisation.” No one talks about this yearning for chaos and bloodshed that lies in the human heart.

I take in some aerial views from the tower of City Hall before visiting Book Traders again, determined to find something at this iconic store. After thirty minutes of searching, feeling like I'm done with the sorts of books I usually read, I'm almost ready to give up for the second day in a row and, in desperation, resort to the fiction shelves where I find something almost immediately. *The Morning Watch*, by James Agee, is a 1960 printing of a novella written in 1950, with pages so brown, they're almost orange. I have my book and a fridge magnet I found last night, so I'm ready to leave Copenhagen.

Getting to the airport is easy again and I get a fifty-dollar tax refund on my lens at the appropriate counter before sitting down with the best (and most expensive) cappuccino ever. Then the money recovered with the refund is quickly stolen back by a Wizz Air scam that robs me of the same amount for not taking a few seconds to check-in online when they made it impossible for me to do so as a Canadian citizen. But getting fleeced and mistreated is to be expected now in airports, so I try not to let it bother. I tell myself to appreciate the miracle of air travel that will have me in the Ukraine in three hours.



Because of a time change I miscalculated, the flight is actually only two hours, and for the first time ever there's a sharply dressed man with a sign waiting for me at the arrivals gate, an inexpensive ten-dollar treat I had arranged for myself at this late hour. It's almost one in the morning as we drive through wide, empty streets to the Hotel Rus on top of a hill in the center of Kiev. My room on the 16th floor has a great view of the city. I have trouble falling asleep, anxious to explore this very different metropolis in the morning.

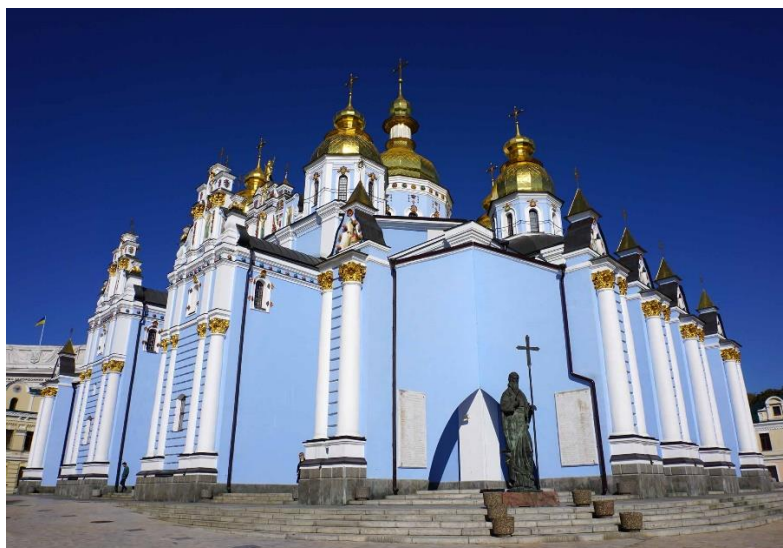
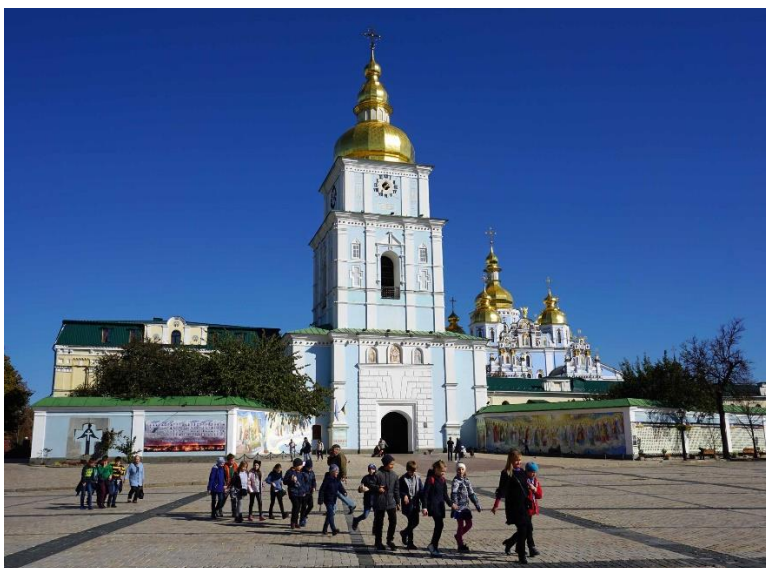
The breakfast buffet in the morning is exotic and excellent and I finish with Orwell before leaving. He bemoans the "fake news" of his time, saying newspaper coverage of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s "often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world." Does anything change? He says we underestimate the power of patriotism and national loyalty, which tyrants like the narcissist Idiot Trump exploit shamelessly to seize power.

The weather forecast is perfect for Day 10 and the lady at reception sketches the 25-minute walking route to Independence Square on the classic, almost useless hotel-counter, tear-away map that will remain folded, and inevitably tattered, in my coat pocket for the next three days.

The route seems simple: just walk down the hill and turn left, continuing most of the way on the same street. But, as usual in Europe, the road twists and turns mysteriously and the street signs, mostly non-existent, are in Cyrillic which might as well be Klingon. But it's a beautiful day and I'm feeling good and why not get lost?

I eventually find Khreshchatyk Street which becomes a very wide boulevard as it leads to the square. Beyond the square, I take a break at a nice little café before visiting the first of so many colorful churches in this city. I get some nice shots and have a brief conversation with a young man in a bear suit in a square full of military vehicles.

At one of the golden-domed churches, the Cathedral of St. Michael's Monastery, while trying to get the whole church in a shot, I back up and climb three steps at the entrance of the facing building and begin to move sideways with my eye to the viewfinder, as I often do, to frame the image. Suddenly, my right foot steps off the platform and I fall into the abyss, bouncing off the flagstones and hearing the sickening sound of my camera scraping off the ground once again.



The palm of my right hand, which I must have extended to protect myself, seems to have absorbed most of the impact, but I'm worried about my fragile shoulder that's given me so much trouble in the past. Thankfully, the camera seems okay, with no *Camera cannot detect lens* fatal message. The hand is sore, and the arm is feeling numb already, but the shoulder seems to be okay. Not for the first time, I wonder if I'm getting too old for this kind of travel.

Behind the church, I find a funicular that takes me down to the Dnieper River where I take a break with a delicious milkshake at a McDonald's and assess the damage one more time. The hand and arm are getting number, but it could have been much worse. I could have broken something, hit my head, re-injured my shoulder, or broken my glasses (or my camera, for the second time in a week). If I'm being pursued by a demon of darkness on this trip, I'm also being protected by an angel, I tell myself.

After exploring the riverfront, I take the funicular back up to the top of the ridge and slowly make my way back to my hotel, enjoying a fantastic four-dollar dinner in an upscale supermarket in the basement of the nearby Gulliver shopping center. So far, only the hand is worrying, with my palm turning bluer and bluer. I've booked an all-day post-apocalyptic tour to Chernobyl tomorrow.

The hand is stiffer and the palm even bluer in the morning of Day 11, but the arm feels no worse. It's surprisingly easy to find my way back down to Independence Square on only my second day here and I arrive at the tour bus meeting-point an hour early.

There are about twelve of us on the minibus and it's a two-hour drive to a unique place on the planet: a mostly deserted zone left contaminated by the 1986 nuclear disaster, the worst nuclear accident in history. On the way, a documentary on a television monitor explains some of the history and aftermath.

Thousands of people died putting out the fire before covering it with a "sarcophagus" that had to be replaced thirty years later by an ingeniously designed "mega-tomb." Today, aside from the forests which will remain dangerous for 20,000 years, the contaminated zone is surprisingly radiation-safe, and settlers are beginning to trickle back into some villages. Children, however, are still prohibited from entering the zone.



130,000 people were forced to evacuate after the disaster, leaving behind several ghost towns. To avoid a panic, they were told they would be allowed to return in three days, so they left everything behind as they rushed out. The zone has the highest density of wolves in the world, which must mean wildlife is thriving in the contaminated forests.

It's a strange day, with perfect, sunny weather for this post-apocalyptic setting that's become a tourist attraction. After passing through two check-points, the first stop is a nursery school on the side of the road that we are allowed to explore for a few minutes on our own. Toys and books litter the floors of the crumbling building and the first impression, which will be reinforced throughout the day, is how cold an abandoned building is – like walking into a refrigerator. Lunch is very good in one of the small towns where settlers are beginning to return; someone has to provide services to the people who work at the site and the growing number of tourists.

Pripyat is the most famous town in the zone, a model Soviet town that was showcased as paradise when it was finished just three years before the disaster. A few years later, the Soviet Union itself would dissolve into history. This is the highlight of the trip: a slow walk around this small city being rapidly reclaimed by nature. A supermarket, high school, amusement park, even a small soccer stadium, all crumbling after only thirty years of neglect.

I watch other people taking photos; one young man crouches down in the high school gymnasium to take a shot with abandoned running shoes in the foreground and I think we must all look like scavenger-voyeurs, disaster-tourists.

There are two check-points on the way back out of the zone where tourists are required to pass through radiation detector booths, both with small souvenir shops. I would have liked to buy a fridge magnet, but they were all much too big, like the monster insects exposed to radiation in old black-and-white movies.

Back in the city, the main drag, Khreshchatyk, is closed to traffic and teeming with people and street performers on a Saturday night. I find a fridge magnet, buy a roll of Vladimir Putin toilet paper (the country is still at war with Russia), and have another fantastic four-dollar dinner before heading back to the hotel.



Chernobyl Nursery School

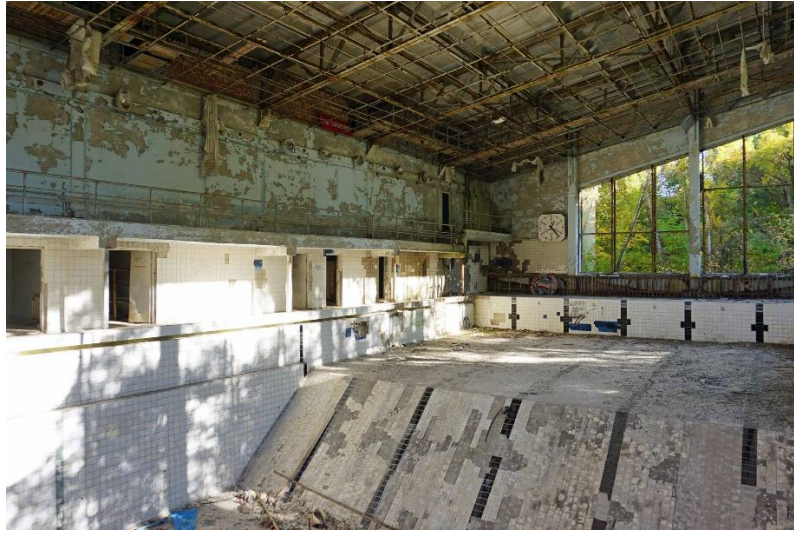


The Mega-tomb



Pripyat





Day 12 will be another sunny day in Kiev, my last day, but it feels like I just got here, and I wouldn't mind staying longer in this city that doesn't yet look like everywhere else. The hand is less stiff but the palm is a darker blue and the upper arm is slightly sorer. I finish Agee's novella before setting out, which will leave me bookless tomorrow unless I begin the New Testament.

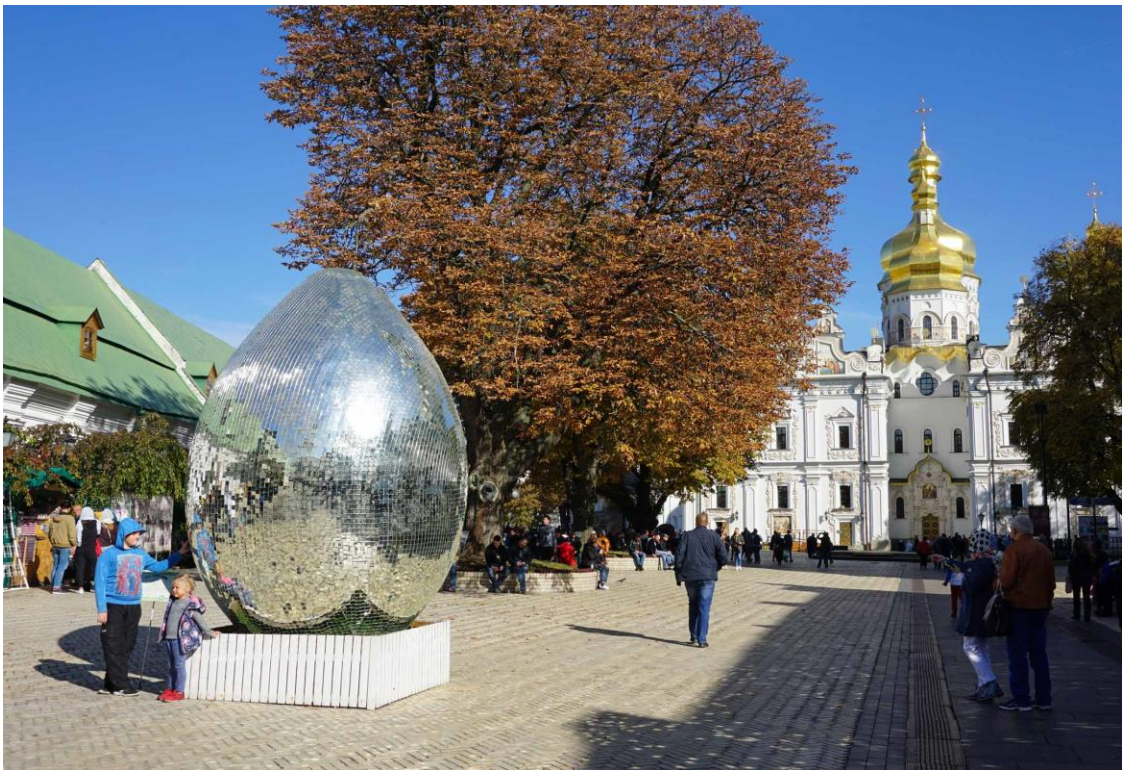
Agee's story is about an over-pious 12-year-old boy who takes the story of Christ's execution, and his own participation in the accompanying rituals of a Catholic Easter in a religious boarding school, very seriously. I understand it because I was like that myself for a while at the same age, but I guess the question is: How does a rational adult deal with these lurid stories, the mumbo-jumbo and cheesy adornments of so many religious rites? So far, I've stepped inside only one of the churches I've photographed here. The images, statues, golden trinkets and other decorations of an Orthodox Christian church were overwhelming and suffocating – and so dark compared to the brilliant sunshine outside, I left almost immediately.

First stop this morning will be the Golden Gate fortress, which I get lost a few times searching for, once in one of the underground shopping labyrinths that you find under major intersections here, with exits every-which-way and rarely a street sign to re-orient yourself when you finally emerge. There are police and soldiers everywhere and it looks like a big demonstration might be in the works, but Google seems to know nothing of it. I get the feeling - a strange feeling in this hyper-connected world - that Google pays little attention to this part of the planet.

I eventually find the fortress and climb the steps to the top before taking the subway to Arsel'na, the deepest subway station in the world. The station is claustrophobic and teeming with rushing people down at track level, and it takes five minutes, on two endless escalators, to make it back up to the surface where I manage to find the series of parks and monuments overlooking the Dnieper that lead up to the 335-foot Motherland Statue. On the way, in yet another underground labyrinth, I buy a small notebook and pen to write the prayer I will leave in the Western Wall in Jerusalem.



The Golden Gate





The Motherland



It's surprising how few people speak English here compared to the rest of Europe; even the policeman I asked for directions earlier couldn't identify where I was on my little map. Street signs are rare and most often in Klingon, but I'm liking the foreignness of this place compared to Copenhagen where everyone seems able to speak English with hardly an accent and which looks like a cleaner Amsterdam without the hordes of tourists.

Halfway to the Motherland, I stop for lunch in a pub and to try out my new pen, which I love. It's hard to believe I'll be in Jerusalem tomorrow. There are so many people out and about today, religious processions and soldiers everywhere. So nice to see families with children out for a Sunday stroll and ice cream, enjoying the simple pleasures we seem to have forgotten in the West.

I eventually reach the Motherland Statue and climb the steps at the base to take in the views before heading back. It's not been the greatest travel day, but on the way to my hotel I find a nice little ceramic cross in a crafts shop and six pairs of boxers to use up my Ukrainian cash. At one point, I had stopped at a major intersection to watch a massive demonstration of military personnel and others march by, flares lighting up the night and a deafening noise that sounded like a cannon firing every minute or so, setting off car alarms. Later, I will learn that today is Defenders Day, set aside to honor the military.

I feel edgy in the morning of Day 13. The Israeli airline, El Al, has their own section at the airport with their own security protocols which include pointed questions and passing a wand over almost everything in each bag. Once again, I get robbed for being prevented from checking in online, just another example of airlines doing their best to make air travel as unpleasant as possible.

I'm unwilling to pay extra for seat selection so the lady at the check-in counter, looking pissed off, gives me what turns out to be the window seat in the very last row, which seems even more cramped than a regular seat once I wedge myself in. Then two heavy-set women take the seats between me and the aisle, boxing me in, inducing immediate claustrophobia. I ask a flight attendant if I can still pay for an aisle seat and, bless his soul, he eventually finds me one much further up for no extra fee. There's even an empty seat next to me, a small piece of luck to help change the mood.

Shortly after take-off, the attendants hand out a free sandwich and bottle of water and all is forgiven El Al. I remember where I'm going and how much suffering, discomfort (death even) has always been a normal part of pilgrimages

throughout history, and I feel the shame of spoiled entitlement. What has this pilgrimage cost me? So little that it may be hard, once in the Holy Land, to feel anything significant in my mushy soul. Then the seatbelt lights flash on and for the first time ever I almost welcome the turbulence. Almost.

But, I tell myself, it didn't just take a three-hour flight to get to my destination. It's taken thirteen days and there were a few hardships on the way: the cold and rain in Iceland, the dropped camera and broken lens, the fall from the steps in front of St. Michael's in Kiev. Not much, but something at least if you add it up. I'll need to pay close attention to my self in the Holy Land – to stay mindful as much as possible, and open to signs and movements of air and spirit. As a friend wrote yesterday, it's a once-in-a-lifetime event, better late than never.

The plane begins its descent. They say this place feels like a homecoming for people of all races and creeds. I wonder if it will feel this way to me, especially since my DNA test last year revealed 8% Jewish and 8% Middle Eastern Arab. I resolve to try to let nothing bother me here and to focus on the sacred.

I skip the stress of buses and trains and take a reasonably priced door-to-door shared taxi-van from the airport in Tel Aviv to my Airbnb lodgings in Jerusalem. It's overcast and the light is a smudgy grey, so the countryside is not very attractive at first glance. The houses and buildings are all the same color as the craggy stone outcroppings, a slightly pinkish beige, kind of like my skin. I will later learn the color is Jerusalem stone

My hosts are nice people, she originally Canadian, he American. I love the neighborhood I'm staying in, the German Colony, and enjoy the best falafel sandwich ever at a nearby restaurant on Emek Refa'im Street. I feel comfortable here already.

The sky is blue in the morning of Day 14, and the Web says it's a thirty-minute walk to the Jaffa Gate of the Old City, starting on defunct railroad tracks that have been boarded over and made into a walkway bordered by fragrant plants. I've taken the New Testament with me and the plan is to read the Gospel of John over the next three days.

Of course, I get lost a couple of times and eventually ask an older man if the Jaffa Gate is where I think it is. “Yes,” he says, “very easy. Walk straight, go through the garden, and there it is.” And there it is: I cross a noisy, traffic-filled street and I’m into one of the oldest and holiest of all cities that some say is the navel of our world.

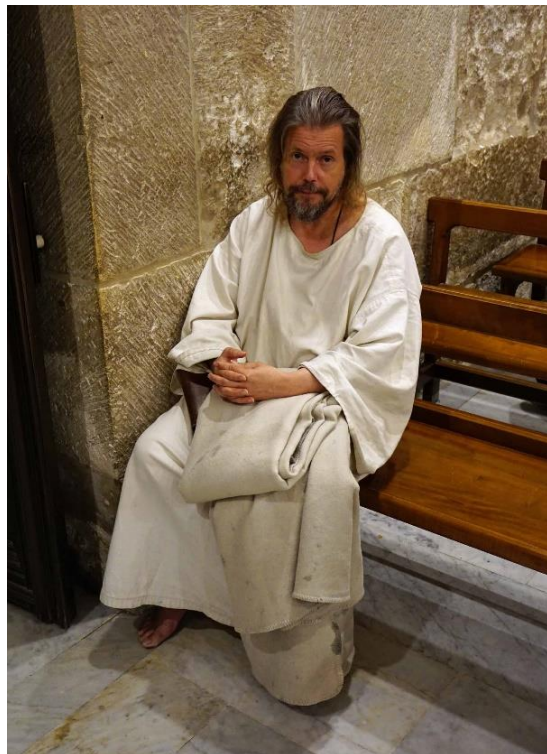
Predictably, there are tourists and pilgrims everywhere, jammed into a space that is only one square kilometer divided into four quarters: Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Armenian. I begin with the Christian Quarter on my left where I immediately spot Razzouk Tattoo, the not-yet-open shop where I would like to get a pilgrim’s tattoo. The map I picked up at the tourist center near the gate is pretty useless and I immediately get lost in the narrow side streets. Eventually, as I will learn is almost inevitable, I stumble upon the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which I will end up visiting often in the next three days.

The church, the alleged site of the tomb of Christ, Golgotha (crucifixion hill) and several other sacred hot points, is jam-packed with pilgrims and the line-up to visit the tomb, enclosed in a “little house” of its own in the center of the church, is daunting. I step into the Chapel of the Apparition off to the side to take a break on a pew. The chapel is said to be on the site where Jesus appeared to his mother Mary. Soon, a man in white robes asks me to push over so he can sit beside me; apparently, I was sitting in his spot at the end of the front pew, up against the wall.

The man is James Joseph, otherwise known as *The Jesus Guy*. He’s been wandering the world without money or shoes, with just a Bible and the clothes on his back, for over twenty-five years. He’s slightly famous and someone actually made a documentary about him ten years ago. These days he’s hanging out here, close to his master’s tomb, sleeping on the roof of the church with the Ethiopian monks who have been up there since 1850. Aside from the Ethiopians, six other Christian factions share the premises, the keys to which have been held by the same Muslim family since 1192.



The Little House



James Joseph

James is a sweet, intelligent guy and I enjoy talking with him. I can understand why people want to help him and take him places. He travels a lot and has been to Montreal several times. I offer to buy him breakfast, but he's already eaten with the Ethiopians and never accepts money. He tells me he's originally from Detroit and recently suffered a small stroke. I comment on the over-the-top imagery, rituals and rote of the various Christian denominations and he agrees but says it's harmless and works for some people.

I ask him about my dream of the bright light and he warns that Satan has a special power over dreams. I tell him I'm reading the Gospel of John, where there are many references to "The Light" and his own face lights up. "John is the best Gospel," he says. Before I leave, he gives me a little tour of the church.

The Muslim Quarter begins just outside the church, with narrow streets full of people and shops, most selling souvenirs. Somehow, I find myself back at the Jaffa Gate, where I buy a ticket to walk on the ramparts of the Old City. But it's too hot up there and it takes thirty minutes to cool off, sitting in the shade, once I come down into the Muslim Quarter again, with swarms of people, confusion and prayers being chanted over scratchy loudspeakers.

Further on, in the Jewish Quarter, I buy a cup of the wonderfully restorative, freshly squeezed pomegranate juice they sell everywhere in the Old City (something I will do every day here as I did in Istanbul ten years ago) and sit down at the entrance to the Western Wall to write, with the pen and paper bought in Kiev, the prayer I will insert in a crack in the wall, as is the tradition. Once past the security-check, the ritual takes only a few minutes, then it's through another security-check to the golden-domed Temple Mount where women and men are given clothing to cover up exposed flesh. The Dome of the Rock is wonderful, itself worth a trip to Jerusalem.

It's only two o'clock and I'm already exhausted. I take another long break in the shade to read some John. His Gospel begins with the mysterious "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Then Jesus meets and is baptized by John the Baptist, an itinerant preacher who subsisted on honey and locusts. John the Baptist says he himself is not The Light, but with "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," would bear witness to The Light that is Jesus.



The Muslim Quarter



The Western Wall



The Dome of the Rock





The view from the ramparts

Jesus is rejected by his own people (“a prophet has no honor in his own country”) so he starts walking and talking to people along the way. His first miracle is to change water into wine at a wedding. He preaches about the need to be born again, not of the flesh but of the spirit. He seems to speak directly to my dream of the bright light when he says, “the evil hate the light, lest their deeds be exposed!” On the dangers of pursuing earthly fame, success and approval, he asks, “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you don’t seek the glory that is from the one and only God?”

I make my way back to the Christian Quarter where the tattoo shop is now open and there are no customers waiting. Wassim, the artist, accepts me immediately and it takes only twenty minutes to have the Jerusalem Cross tattoo permanently inked on the inside of my right forearm.

Razzouk Tattoo has been in business for 700 years and the stamp Wassim uses to print the design on my skin is 500 years old, a piece of broken olive wood that has been used on countless pilgrims. The four small crosses within a bigger cross is the emblem and coat of arms of the 13th-century Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem. It’s also been said to represent the five wounds of Christ, or Christ and the four authors of the Gospels. The symbolism I prefer is that it represents the four corners of the world: the official seal of a traveller/pilgrim.

I leave the Old City in search of a used bookstore not far away, which turns out to be not very interesting. Neither is the pasta I sit down with on a sidewalk terrace in this busy neighborhood. But I’m revived and ready to try the Old City again, this time the South Wall of the ramparts, hoping it will be cooler with fewer pilgrims closer to dinnertime.

It is cooler and the views are nice from the ramparts, but back down in the crowded, claustrophobic souk it’s stifling again. I slowly make my way back to my lodgings. In the evening, after another wonderful falafel sandwich in the German Colony, I watch *The Jesus Guy* on the Web and make the last booking of the trip: an Airbnb in Tel Aviv for Friday night. I’ll get there early in the morning which will give me two whole days in the city. I wasn’t able to cancel the stupidly expensive hotel I reserved for Saturday night and my return flight is early Sunday morning.







None of the tours to places outside Jerusalem seem to be available at the last minute, so I decide to spend the next two days simply hanging around the Old City, walking and taking lots of breaks. The plan is to imprint the layout of this holiest of cities on my mental landscape. The shoulder, arm and hand seem to be fine, the palm now only slightly blue.

In the morning of Day 15, I consider taking a bus to the Dead Sea on my own, but it would be too hot to hang out at the lowest place on the planet, without recourse to air-conditioning. So, it will be another day in the Old City, and perhaps a walk up the Mount of Olives. Maybe I'll bump into James Joseph again. I'll try to avoid as much as possible the crowded souks and read the Gospel of John along the way.

It's overcast when I leave the house which is a relief. The souks are not so crowded and bearable after all so early in the morning. The shopkeepers are sitting on chairs outside their shops, just as Marwa described them in Homs, and I wonder if they maintain the same tradition here of waiting for each other to make their first sale.

Inevitably, I bump into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which is dangerously crowded when I wedge myself into the entrance area. Towards the back, the doors to the Chapel of the Apparition are closed, so I sit down to wait with John.

J.C.'s second miracle is the healing of the son of a royal official. His third, the feeding of a great multitude with five loaves of bread and three fish, is actually part of a series of events. After this picnic, he preaches to the crowd: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves." Shortly after, he is seen walking on water.

When the doors of the chapel finally open, there's James Joseph, sitting in his spot. I sit down next to him and tell him I checked him out on the Web last night and ask him what he thinks of the film I watched. "Good and bad," he says, "they tried to show both sides." What surprised him most were the negative comments made by people he had been close to for years. I tell him I thought nothing particularly negative was said by anyone in a film that portrayed him as genuine and sincere. He gives me advice on finding organized tours (which will turn out to be inaccurate) and suggests I come very early tomorrow if I want to visit the tomb without standing in line for two hours (again, not quite accurate).



Church of the Holy Sepulchre

I spot him again before I leave the church, near the bathrooms, performing ablutions off to the side, probably in a place set aside for him. He has pulled a large bottle of what looks like mouthwash out of a plastic bag and I remember noticing his teeth yesterday. This must be one of the most problematic things about his way of life. He looks to be in his late fifties and teeth demand so much professional intervention beyond middle age.

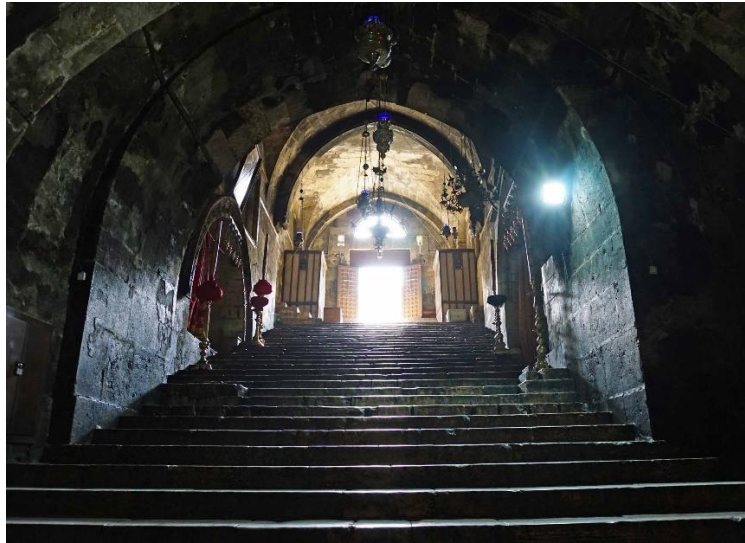
Outside again, taking my time, I eventually make it to the Lion's Gate to begin the climb up the Mount of Olives. But first I visit the Turkish cemetery just outside the gate, then the Garden of Gethsemane across the road, where Jesus spent his last evening with eight olive trees as witnesses, and where he was betrayed and arrested. Also at the foot of the Mount is the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, the site on which she is said by the faithful to have risen to heaven. I get a shot of light pouring into the open doors from the bottom of the steps leading down to the grotto.

The road up the hill looks daunting and I use the need to conserve energy (and feet) as an excuse to splurge on a taxi to the top where the views of the Old City are wonderful, but the churches are all closed for lunch. I get some nice shots, then walk slowly back down the hill, reminding myself to be mindful of where I am.

Back at the foot of the Mount, I linger a while in the cool darkness of the Church of the Agony beside the Garden of Gethsemane. A large exposed rock in front of the altar is where Jesus is said to have prayed before his arrest.

Then it's back into the Old City where I wander aimlessly, immersing myself in the chaos of the souk, eating yet another falafel sandwich in the Muslim Quarter, taking photos of the Damascus Gate, and finally making my way home through the maze of parks and houses to the German Colony.

In the evening I revisit Emek Refa'im Street and it looks so un-Middle Eastern until I see a group of girls who look like they are sixteen, except two of them are in uniform and carrying automatic rifles that are probably longer than they are tall and, no, this is not like everywhere else.



Day 16 will be my last day of walking in the Old City. I'll try to bump into James again. I'm up early and I make it to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre by 7:30, hoping to beat the hordes. As it happens, there's a mass going on in front of the tomb, blocking the entrance, and there's already a good lineup but it's not too stifling and it looks doable. But then the mass goes on and on with endless droning in Latin, making me more and more irritated and, after almost giving up several times, the line finally starts to move at nine o'clock.

Half an hour later, I make it into the "Little House" where you have to stoop to enter a tiny second door to kneel at the tomb with two other people for a few seconds. I feel nothing special in there, aside from the loss of two hours. When I emerge from this Christian pilgrim climax, James is standing opposite the tomb and I have my final conversation with him.

I ask him again about my dream but he has nothing new to add, saying a bit peevishly, "I gave you my thoughts on that already." I ask him if he ever considered becoming a priest and he says it's not a decision one makes on one's own, but a calling. God asks you, but He never asked him. Besides, he says, as a priest he wouldn't have been able to do what he's been doing for the last quarter century: meeting so many people and spreading the Gospel. I shake his hand and wish him luck, wondering if I'll ever see him again.

Back near the Jaffa Gate I have my first sit-down coffee in the Old City at the spacious Christ Church Café where I feel like I could really enjoy a nap right now. Each time I try to read some John my eyes start to close, but I persevere.

Jesus is constantly being tested, especially by the scribes and Pharisees. At one point they bring him a woman caught in adultery and ask him what should be done with her. Here he delivers one of his most enlightened teachings, something that should be repeated over and over in our present times to try to get the judgers, scolders, finger-pointers and scapegoaters (especially on social media) to shut up now and then: "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

At a later point in the Gospel, Jesus himself will run away from the stone-throwers. Those who were entrusted with local power by the ruling Romans were always concerned about people who might draw the community away from accepting them as their representatives. Jesus was from the beginning a political threat.



Revived by caffeine, I decide to try to circle the city clockwise, as I began to do when I first entered the Jaffa Gate two days ago, staying as close to the wall as possible. The walk begins again in the Christian Quarter, with quiet little streets and even benches to sit on. The Muslim Quarter begins near the Damascus Gate, where things quickly get crowded and noisy and once again I give up my plan to circle the city and instead look for the Via Dolorosa, the fourteen stations of the Way of the Cross, the path Jesus took to his execution.

People actually live in this part of the city: later I will learn that almost 40,000 people live within the walls, including about 6,000 Christians and 3,000 Jews. In this quarter, there are lots of ordinary people shopping and school children running and shouting. Young men push red and green three-wheeled carts with a small tire tied to the backside to pull down and step on as a brake on the narrow, slippery ramps in the middle of the road, ramps they use to avoid the steps as they rush through the crowds to make their deliveries. Now and then a small vehicle or motorcycle will somehow manage to squeeze through the chaos without maiming anyone.

Station 1 is the Sanctuary of the Flagellation, a Catholic church said to be on the site where Jesus was flogged by Roman soldiers as he began his painful walk. I'm not the only one tracing this path: you have to watch out for the herds of pilgrims who move as one entity with one mind, ignoring individuals like me. Let one pass and you have to let them all. I'm glad I didn't volunteer to be part of a herd and sign up for any organized tours.

Station 2, near the Ecce Homo Arch, is where Jesus picked up his cross. The rest of the Via Dolorosa, until you reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, winds its way through crowded shopping streets. Station 3 is where Jesus falls for the first time, Station 4 where he meets his mother, Mary. Here, I walk through a huge gift shop to enter the Armenian Church of Our Lady of the Spasm, where I take a break to read some John.



Station 2



Station 3

For his fifth miracle, J.C. spits on the ground, makes clay of the spittle and applies it to the eyes of a blind man, restoring his sight. His sixth and most famous miracle is the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. "And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die," he says, echoing something he said earlier in the Gospel: "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word he shall never see death." I wonder what it means that the main character in *Happy as Lazarro*, the film I saw in Reykjavik, dies twice in the film, the second time looking as if it might be permanent.

Stations 5 to 8 are easy to find but I will never find Station 9. I take another break in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer near Station 8 before entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the last time. I try to pay my respects at Stations 10 to 14 inside the church but it's all too much at this time of day, with more pilgrim herds than ever, and no sign of James Joseph. It's 2:30 and I'm beat.

Eventually, I find my way back to the Christ Church Café near the Jaffa Gate. There's nowhere else I want to go today so I'll rest here for as long as it takes to revive, then go back in for one last walk in the Old City streets. I peel the plastic protective covering off the tattoo and it looks great.

I re-enter the narrow streets but don't last long in the crowds, so it's back to the Jaffa Gate for the last time and one more navigation through the maze back to my lodgings, taking a few breaks along the way to finish reading John.

In one of my favorite Gospel stories, the day before Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, he's visiting Lazarus whose sister Martha uses expensive perfume to anoint his feet which she then dries with her hair. Judas, the traitor, scolds them about the extravagance, saying the money could have been given to the poor. Jesus responds in a way that suggests we not forget to live the moment, to not dwell on suffering or wallow in self-righteousness, and to be happy with what we have now before it is taken away, as everything eventually is: "For the poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me."



Station 6



Station 7

Once he enters Jerusalem, after the Last Supper at which he enacts the first Eucharist and washes the feet of his own disciples, the gruesome account of his tortuous death takes up the rest of the Gospel of John. One of the things he says to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, before being arrested, is: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. I am the vine and you are the branches." This will prove important in deciphering of the meaning of this trip.

In the evening, I take a last walk in the German Colony and enjoy one more falafel dinner. I begin the Agee book, edit the Jerusalem photos, and search for things to do in Tel Aviv. There doesn't seem much of interest; it could be a quiet, uneventful ending to this trip.

I take a taxi to the bus station early in the morning of Day 17. The station is a bit shabby and there are young soldiers with big guns everywhere, but coffee and a Danish in a bustling café are cheap and good. It's not a long ride to Tel Aviv and, once again, I notice the pinkish-beige color of the land and the buildings (Jerusalem stone) on a misty, grey day.

I take another taxi from the bus station in Tel Aviv to my Airbnb lodgings and, after meeting my hosts, a friendly young couple, it's a ten-minute walk to the beach where it's still overcast: bad for the camera, good for walking on a hot day. The plan is to walk along the sea all the way to Old Jaffa Port which the Web says should take an hour without breaks but will probably take me three.

The walk is not particularly attractive to begin with, but at one point there's a seawall with huge green waves pounding it and, leaning against the fence looking out onto the Mediterranean, the smell of salt water on the breeze is wonderful. I could do just this: stand here all day as long as it's overcast, breathing sea air and watching the water churning above the rocks below.

Then the sun comes out through a hole in the clouds just long enough to take a photo and a jetliner passes very low in the sky above my head. We must be near an airport. A splash from an especially large wave wets my face, shirt and camera, and finally the sun comes out for real and it's time to walk and sweat and get some nice shots in pale, whitish light with a dirty blue sky. Maybe I'll just do seaside shooting; the rest of this modern city looks much like anywhere else.

I continue along the shore, getting some nice shots, until it gets too hot and I detour up to Allenby Street where it proves impossible to find an air-conditioned

restaurant that doesn't charge a limb or two. Many are already shutting down for the Shabbat weekend. Finally, a McDonald's appears like a milkshake oasis and I realize I'm starving, having eaten nothing since the Danish this morning. The milkshake revives me and I eat something that tastes vaguely like a hamburger that hits the spot.

I linger till I cool off and don't really feel like going back out there, but I forge on. The Web tells me that the used bookstore on my list, Halper's Books, is only four minutes away, and it's open when I get there! I finally find a book in Israel: *Cultures in Conflict* by Bernard Lewis. Old Jaffa is not much further away, but there's little to see when I get there and the walk back along the shore seems endless, part of it with my feet in the warm water, making it much more pleasant.

The search for dinner near my lodgings is almost as frustrating as lunch, even in this densely populated neighborhood. A young man at a juice stand recommends the Fat Cow, so it's another hamburger, but this time a very good (and expensive) one.

Once home, I'm so tired I inadvertently erase all the photos I took today. But I feel no great loss – I feel like the trip is over already anyway and tomorrow I might just relax in my expensive hotel room and maybe go to the Art Museum and Cinematheque, both within easy walking distance. It's Saturday (Shabbat) tomorrow, so even the buses won't be running, and it will be a long day going home on Sunday. It's hard to believe the buses don't run on Saturday in this very secular city. My hosts tell me it's a political concession to the ultra-religious minority.

I finish the Agee book before I sleep. *The Morning Watch* is a novella about a twelve-year-old boy in a religious boarding school who has duties to perform in the early morning hours of Good Friday. He's hypersensitive to all the morbid details of what is called the Passion of Christ, the last bloody hours of his life and death. I was the same for a year or two at about the same age, so I can identify with childhood piety and maybe this is what the book has to tell me: that piety can easily transform into pointless self-absorption.

On Day 18, the last full day of the trip, the feet seem to be reaching their limit. I linger in my lodgings, talking to my hosts, Rachel and Tal, before taking a taxi downtown to the brand new Hotel Link & Hub. The young lady at the reception desk seems to know almost nothing and it seems like I'm the first

person to ever ask about an airport shuttle. She says they can call me a taxi in the morning.

I take a short nap and start the Lewis book in my bright, shiny, ultra-modern hotel room before heading out. The aim of *Cultures in Conflict*, the three cultures being Islamic, Christian and Jewish, is to draw attention to other things that happened in 1492 aside from the European discovery of North America, such as the Christian conquest of Granada and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain a few months later. Lewis says Jews and Christians flourished in the Iberian Peninsula during the eight centuries of Islamic occupation.

The conflict lasted a long time. For a thousand years, until the defeat of the Muslims outside the gates of Vienna in 1683, Europe lived under “the constant and imminent menace of Islam.” At the start of this conflict, Muslims had the more advanced culture and perceived Medieval Europeans as uncivilized people with nasty habits. Eventually this situation would reverse, as does everything over time, the pendulum swinging back and forth.

It’s hot when I step outside and walk past the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, which I decide not to enter, on the way to the Cinematheque where it turns out the movie I want to see has no English subtitles and I wonder why they couldn’t have said so on their bilingual website.

I’m exhausted and my feet hurt but, not knowing what else to do, I decide to take one last walk down to the sea. There are too many people when I get there, frolicking in the shallow water, frisbees sailing through the air, some too close to my head for comfort. Once again, I feel like the trip was over two days ago. Nothing left to do now, except maybe treat myself to a nice dinner and bring a couple of beers back to my posh room.

Dinner at a hipster falafel place recommended by Tal is disappointing and I’m stymied one last time in this country when I find the convenience store next to the hotel is closed for Shabbat. I take a long, luxurious shower (the shower head is the size of a large pizza), then head down to the basement bar wearing long pants for the first time in this city and a clean t-shirt. I buy an overpriced half-pint of beer in the empty hotel bar, but at least it comes with almonds and a small dish of olives.

Even though nothing special happened in Tel-Aviv, I leave with a good impression. It seems like a nice place to live, a modern secular city with a cosmopolitan feel and a beach culture I don’t even see in California. The water is

warmer here and more accessible to more people, I think. With large apartment blocks in dense neighborhoods, the number of people who live within walking distance of a beach is probably much greater than in a place like Los Angeles.

The Lewis book is a quick and interesting read. He says the Crusades were a “long-delayed Christian response to the jihad, an attempt to recover by holy war what had been lost by holy war.” Re-taking Jerusalem, the city revered by all three cultures, became the focus.

Oct. 21, Day 19: the trip is over, with no final dream to explain or contextualize the meaning of a trek I guess I’ll figure out when I get home. As if on cue, the feet have given out this morning. The outside toes on each foot are very sore, making it difficult to walk.

I begin the 20-hour journey home in a taxi to the airport at five a.m., and good conversation with the driver. I ask him about the compulsory military service and he says there are exceptions – not all assignments are combative and there are non-military, administrative options. There are hardly any cars on the road and the ride is quicker and cheaper than expected. Airport security is not as difficult as expected either and breakfast is reasonably priced and good. The day is starting well.

I almost finish reading Lewis in the airport. The author is a Conservative with strong views. He says the conquering, subjugation and exploitation of large parts of the world by Europeans was unprecedented in modern times, but the guilt this civilization experienced, the freeing of the slaves, and the modern preoccupation with human rights, is unique in all of recorded history.

He warns of the danger of a liberal civilization undermining itself with guilt, a mental condition that can be “corrosive and destructive and is an extreme form of the arrogant self-indulgence that is the deepest and most characteristic flaw of our Western civilization. To claim responsibility for all the ills of the world is a new version of the ‘white man’s burden.’” Somehow, this makes me think of the extreme adoration of some of the pilgrims at the shrines in Jerusalem: the self-absorption of the worshiper, how easy it is for something that seems to be bathed in light to turn dark.

It’s a long but decent seven-hour flight to Iceland with some good time passed standing at the back near the bathrooms talking to Simon, a Russian-Canadian Torontonion of Jewish descent. We talk about left vs. right, gender fluidity, Trump, the decline of our civilization... all the fun topics people love to

talk about these days. Like so many others, Simon considers himself left but moving to the right, or just fed up with this simplistic duality.

We meet up again in the food court of the airport in Iceland where I pass two of the four hours of my layover in more good conversation. Again, it has mostly to do with a general feeling that our civilization is petering out. The rest of the journey home is quiet and uneventful.

The day after returning I take a walk in my own neighborhood on a bright, brisk autumn day, and I still have no idea what this trip means, but I had my first glimpse of Jerusalem in a dream last night and even if the addition of this most ancient and holy of cities to my repertoire of dreamscapes was all I got from this expensive trip, it's probably enough. Likewise, for magical Iceland with its natural beauty and tiny capital city watched over by the weird and wonderful National Cathedral.

They say Jerusalem, a sacred space shared by three religious cultures, is a microcosm, the navel of the earth. What I will remember probably most about my time there is my detachment from all the rituals and ceremonies and ostentatious adoration. There's a level of mumbo-jumbo beyond which I won't go.

But then what is the Jerusalem Cross on my forearm if not superstition? I think it's more of a souvenir – a skin magnet I will have with me for the rest of my life. It's not a matter of belief: as with the Icelandic stories about the huldofolk (hidden people), it's more interesting and meaningful to act as if metaphors are real sometimes.

Some Christian folktales say the huldofolk are fallen angels condemned to live between heaven and hell. Isn't that us? Suspended between the darkness and the light, living in duality. Maybe a hidden person, a troll, attached itself to me in Iceland, broke my camera, then followed me all the way to Kiev and tried to do it again by pushing me off the steps. But something intervened and saved me and my camera when I was falling into the abyss.

In Chernobyl, there are lovely and friendly stray dogs everywhere, all the same size it seems, and in constant danger from the wolves. Back home, in my own church, Father B. recounts the Cherokee parable of the two wolves. In the parable, an old man tells his grandson that we each have two wolves inside us: a good wolf and a bad wolf who are constantly fighting. The grandson wants to

know which one will win and the old man says the one we feed the most. Feeding the good wolf with spiritual practice is religion; everything else is theater and politics.

I'm pretty sure the bright light in my dream - what lies behind the altar - is death. In the bright light I see myself and my imperfections clearly. Everything dies of course, even civilizations, and Chernobyl shows how quickly things dissolve. Especially man-made things.

James Joseph, the American sadhu, worried me the first time I met him in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and asked about my dream of the bright light, and he said, "Satan has a special power over dreams." But what is this darkness we call Satan?

When I listen to my own inner voice, the jibber-jabber in the background of my consciousness, it's almost constantly judging, comparing, berating... Darkness seems to be the default. It seems to take a *supernatural* effort to hold onto The Light, to locate and then listen to the good inner voice. Maybe we need religion and sagas to constantly remind us to feed the good wolf because it just doesn't come naturally.

In Copenhagen I found beautiful Grundtvig's Church with the bright light behind the altar, and a moment of blissful detachment in the cemetery across the street. I also found a little inscrutable book. Like Richard in *The Morning Watch*, I was that morbidly pious boy that gave religion up when all of a sudden it looked like theater. At the end of the story, Richard, previously a shy, almost invisible kid, finally gains the respect of his peers when he bashes in the head of a snake that was refusing to die after being bludgeoned by two other boys. As Jesus says, we turn away from the Eternal Light for rewards and approval in this world.

I asked James Joseph, what has been the most difficult place he has visited in his ministry. Not surprisingly, it was Rome where the bureaucracy (the scribes and Pharisees) clings to the remnants of its power, living in luxury and pious smugness, with nothing but scorn for barefoot preachers. We need to reclaim religion – take it back from the bureaucrats, holy warriors and (especially) the superstitious.

As Marwa Al-Sabouni says, religion is not the problem, it's identity politics and murderous violence that masquerade as religion. The Crusaders probably did want to reclaim Jerusalem, but they also wanted adventure, which usually involved raping, pillaging and conquering. Darkness masquerading as light.

But as the Gospel of John says, *God did not send the Son into the world to judge, but to save.* He saves with the word, the word that our *eternal life* depends on making the good choices.

If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

I am the vine and you are the branches.

