KURDISH GUIDE PROPOSES RETURN OF ARARAT TO ARMENIA

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Category: Opinions



By Frank Westerman, "ARARAT", page 213, Vintage Books, 2010.

The author is describing his conversation with the Kurdish guide (Ferhat) in Turkish Kurdistan, near Ararat.

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"When Ferhat talked about the PKK leader who had been held since 1999 as a martyr to the Kurdish cause on a prison island in the Sea of Marmara, he didn't speak in a muted voice, but loudly and clearly. Why did we think our Western governments protested so vehemently against his possible execution? Out of humanitarian concern? Or was it opportunism? Someday they're going to need Ocalan,' Ferhat said, 'So you tell me.'
"Maybe he was right, maybe he was wrong. Whatever the case, I was fascinated to see that any rusty old point of view could be twisted 90 degrees to make the world seem a very different place indieed. Mehmet's unabashed 'Welcome to Free Kurdistan' had set my mental wheels in motion, and they hadn't stopped since. "We'll have to surrender Ararat to the Armenians.' Ferhat concluded in a tone that suggested the decision was up to him.

"Talk of Armenia and the inevitable Armenian question called for another cigarette. Ferhat spoke of 'crimes' that put the Turks to shame. 'Did you notice the bulldozing equipment along the road to Isak Pasha Palace ?' he asked.

"We had: the Kamaz had been forced to wait repeatedly for men in fluorescent orange vests. While widening the road, our guide told us, the workmen had stumbled upon an unmarked grave, probably from 1915. He said it was an open secret that the remains were those of Armenians, but that you couldn't talk about that in Turkey.

"Now Ferhat lowered his voice at last. The authorities, he said, had ordered them to simply lay asphalt over the grave. That's how it happenend in Turkey. But as soon as the borders were redrawn, superpowers like France and America, which had absorbed the largest part of the diaspora, would

provide compensation for Armenia. In Ferhat's view, if you added it all up there was only one possible outcome: an independent Kurdistan for the Kurds, Ararat for the Armenians and a Turkey that remained intact from head to torso, from Ankara to Istanbul."

ARARAT

As so often among Western Europeans, religion had slipped out of Frank Westerman's life unnoticed - until he became a father and wondered which aspects of his own religious background and upbringing he wanted to pass on to his daughter. Ararat is a piece of highly personal journalism, splendidly combining Westerman's own questions with the history of religion, political conflict and advances in scientific research.

Westerman returns to the village where he grew up and speaks to his former maths teacher, a man no less well-versed in the Scriptures than he is steeped in the truths of mathematics. He also talks to a geologist, an avowed atheist who is deeply convinced that science will one day be able to fathom all the mysteries of life. But above all his journey takes him to Mount Ararat where, according to biblical tradition, Noah's ark ran aground and God made his covenant with mankind.

Westerman had seen the mountain once on the horizon. Now he sets out to confront it, a challenge both physical and religious. As such, Ararat becomes a symbol of religion, and in attempting to conquer it, he aims to discover 'whether I was capable of freeing myself from that inheritance.'

The book is not unambiguous in its answer. During the climb Westerman feels faith steadily recede from him. The questions he poses at the foot of the mountain remain unanswered and he is certainly not converted. Nevertheless he quotes with approval the Russian cosmonaut who for years had to propound the official doctrine of dialectical materialism and now sighs: 'There is something between heaven and earth about which we humans know nothing.' For Westerman the nature of that 'something' remains inscrutable; it is perhaps the very essence of religious mystery.

Ararat ends, symbolically, just short of the summit, which remains tantalisingly out of reach in a storm of powdery snow on a sloping expanse of ice. Meanwhile he has met some of the innumerable ark-seekers who search for historical traces of the biblical story. At the foot of Ararat, Westerman notes the extent to which the mountain is bound up with the centuries-old history of warfare in this region at the frontier between different cultures.

Biography

Frank Westerman is the author of The Bridge over the Tara (1994), Srebrenica: The Blackest Scenario (1997), The Republic of Grain (1999) and Engineers of the Soul (2002). These last two books were awarded prestigious prizes in the Netherlands and became bestsellers. In 2005 Westerman received the Flemish Golden Owl Award for El Negro en ik (El Negro and Me). His latest book is Ararat (2007). His work has been sold in the UK, Germany, France and Spain.