

War and Faith in Sudan

War and Faith in Sudan

by Gabriel Meyer, with photographs by James Nicholls. Willam B. Eerdmans Publishing co., 2005, 216 pages, index. \$20 hardcover

Review by David Morse

The photograph on the cover of *War and Faith in Sudan*, a new book by veteran war correspondent Gabriel Meyer, offers a telling glimpse of its contents. A young Nuba girl of perhaps nine stands straight, although missing her right arm. Her face radiates dignity, intelligence, and inner calm.

This stoic perseverance is a subtext in Meyer's account of the Khartoum government's genocidal assault on the people who live in the Nuba mountains, in the heart of Sudan. The girl survived a bombing attack inflicted by the Sudanese air force on a school in the village of Kaouda on March 2, 2000. Five "barrel bombs," filled with nails, killed 14 children, most of whom were sitting outside receiving instruction under a pair of sycamore trees. The school was deliberately targeted.

The school's makeup exemplifies the religious diversity and tolerance that abounds in the Nuba region, where it is not uncommon to have followers of three different religions within the same family. "In a dark tribute to Nuba tradition," Meyer writes, "seven of the initial fourteen dead children were Muslim, seven Christian."

The Kaouda bombing brought an international outcry, because it was documented by journalists and photographers - Meyer among them. Previous attacks had not received attention.

Now something similar is happening in Darfur, in western Sudan. Attacks by government-sponsored ethnic militias on black farmers who, like the Nuba, are "in the way." This may be the only way Darfur can really be understood - as part of a genocide that has been going on for more than twenty years, in which the primary weapon has always been starvation. Starvation is the specter haunting the 2.5 million displaced people of Darfur right now, as militias and rebels attack aid convoys, forcing international agencies to withdraw personnel.

Meyer calls Darfur "a world-class humanitarian nightmare... both an epilogue to the long civil war between Khartoum and the SPLA [Sudan People's Liberation Army], and a harbinger of future conflicts within Sudan..."

Meyer, who has covered conflicts in Bosnia and elsewhere, has visited Sudan repeatedly from 1998 through 2004, more than once accompanying Sudan-born Bishop Macram Max Gassis to Nuba. In an interview, Gassis declares, "When people talk about

Sudan as a north-south conflict, they're wrong. It's not a struggle between Arab north and African south. The conflict is now and has always been fundamentally about ethnicities: An Arab Muslim elite pitting itself against African ethnic cultures, and this *throughout* the country, north and south, east and west. This is made clear when we consider that while the Nuba are religiously mixed, and the southerners are mainly Christian or followers of traditional belief, the people of Darfur are all *Muslims*. And yet this regime fights them. Why? For racial and ethnic reasons; because they are Africans, along with the Nuba, the Ingassena Hills people, the Beja, the Nubians and many others. This is the heart of the whole conflict; and this is meaning of Darfur."

War and Faith in Sudan is a thoughtful book. Not so much scholarly, as reflective, drawing on the words of poets such as Rilke as well as fact. If the text occasionally betrays the haste with which it must have been assembled from previously published articles - which makes for occasional confusion in the chronology of events - it is nevertheless the work of a insightful and seasoned author, capable of broad analysis and lyrical description of the land and its people.

"So why look through another book of Africans barely surviving?" Anne Lamott writes in introducing the accompanying photographs, taken by James Nicholls. "Well, why read another poem? Why take another strenuous hike? Why visit a friend, who despite your tender presence, is going to die anyway? Because that's why we're here, to find out about life, to experience our humanity more deeply. We're here to pay attention, bear witness, and find our way to an authentic relationship with spirit. We're here to grieve and cheer for one another, and crack open our hearts, even though that often hurts terribly..."