

Journeying through Christendom

One of the oldest Christian shrines, steeped in political history, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is more than what meets the eye

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Israel's stunning capital city Jerusalem is dense with religious significance, its golden walls crammed with a million holy sites, as history whispers from every building, every corner.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a sprawling shrine located in the Old City, is one such structure. Surrounded by the whirligig of *shuks* (markets) and noisy tourists, the church's neighbourhood is a quaint mix of the cosmic with the commercial.

With no majestic steeple rising out of its top, nor a grand facade hinting at the ostentation within, the church is an underwhelming sight at first. As I looked across a hemmed-in amphitheatre, the dilapidated facade of a tawny Romanesque basilica with grey domes and a weather-worn belfry greets me. The church looked more like an excavation project abandoned midway by nervous archaeologists than the holiest of holy sites!

However, as we entered the complex from the southern side, near Souk-el-Dabbagha, a street brimming with shops selling religious paraphernalia, we experienced several jaw-dropping moments. Housed inside is a staggering conglomeration of 30-plus chapels and worship places encrusted with the devotional ornamentation of Christian rites. Immediately to our right — as we enter the church's doorway — is the Stone of Unction, a limestone slab dating back to 1808 commemorating the preparation of Jesus' body.

The walk

Our guide Tami Halperine put things into perspective. "The Church of the Holy Sepulchre," she explained, "is the pre-eminent shrine for Christians who consider it the holiest place on earth. It attracts pilgrims by the thousands daily, all drawn to pay homage to their Saviour, Jesus Christ."

The church — which displayed a mix of architectural styles — was one of the most complex structures ever built. "The first building on this spot was a pagan shrine built in the second century by Emperor Hadrian. Stones from a ruined temple were recycled as building material as a painful reminder to Jews and Christians that Romans were the boss of their holy places," Tami elaborated.

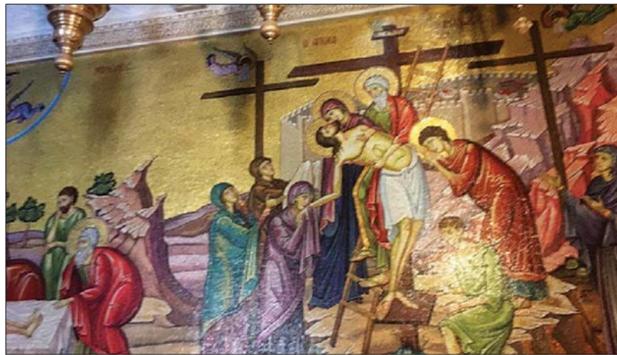
History

The construction of the first

church began by Emperor Constantine I, the first Roman king to convert to Christianity in 312 AD. The emperor commissioned numerous churches across the holy land, the most important being the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 326 AD. The king tore down Hadrian's shrine and had Christ's tomb cut away from the original hill-



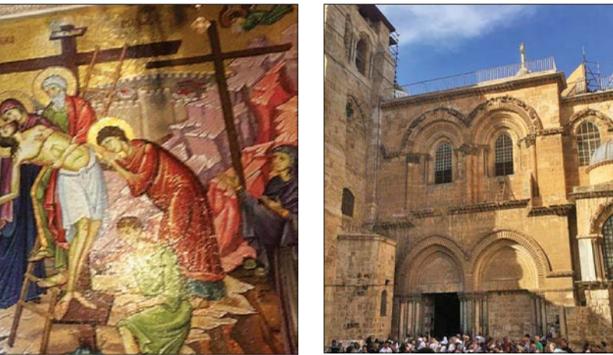
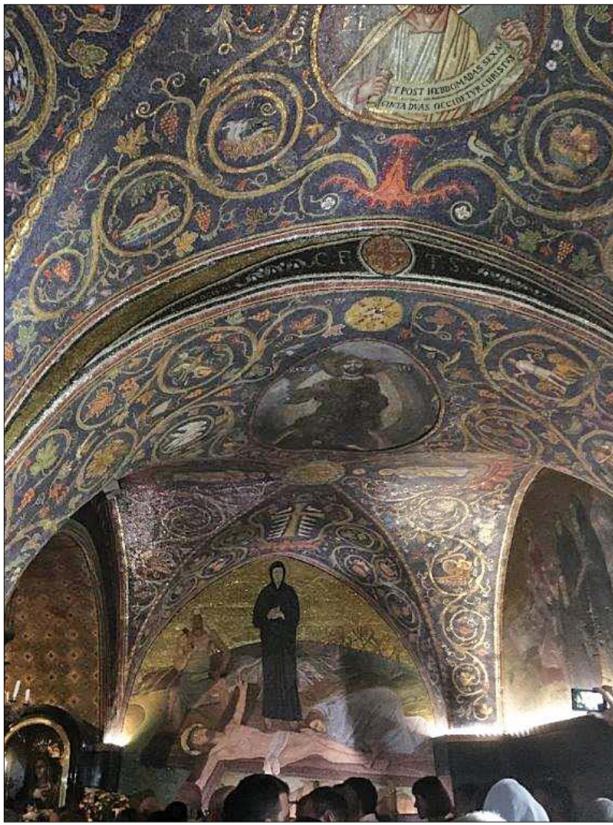
(Clockwise from top) Religious products on sale at a *shuk* shop near the church, frescoed ceilings of the Sepulchre, facade of the church, a fresco illustrating Jesus' death



side. During excavations, Constantine's mother St Helena was said to have discovered the True Cross near the tomb.

Apparently, St Helena was the one to have discovered three crosses — those of two thieves and that of Christ. To pick the one belonging to Christ, a leper was brought in, to touch each one and he was miraculously healed by one of them. The church was burned down by Persians in 614, restored and then destroyed again by the Muslims in 1009 before being partially rebuilt again. The Crusaders completed the reconstruction in 1149 which is essentially the version of the church as it exists today.

We proceeded towards the altar of Our Lady of Sorrows that commemorated the Thirteenth Station. This was where Jesus was taken down from the cross. A silver disc beneath the Greek altar marks the spot where it stood.



Faith

Visitors are allowed to touch the limestone rock of Calvary through a round hole in the disc. On the right, through a transparent glass, we spotted a fissure. Legend says the deformation was caused by the earthquake at the time of Christ's death. Others believe the rock of Calvary was eschewed by quarrymen because it was cracked and therefore considered impure. We next descended a flight of stairs the walls of which were plastered with crosses incised by hundreds of pilgrims over centuries. This was the subterranean section — deep in the bowels of the earth — where Helene stumbled upon the cross.

The centrepiece of the main floor — the Edicule was marked with icons and lanterns. Believers say they feel spiritually uplifted in the silence of the tomb. Some had their eyes closed while others had tears streaming down their

cheeks. The stunning mosaic behind the stone illustrated the journey of Jesus taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb.

Up a steep flight of stairs, we went to the site of the crucifixion, marked by a Greek Orthodox and a Catholic altar. Christians from around the world stood patiently in a serpentine queue waiting to touch the sacred rock.

The end of the journey

Time and tide have not been kind to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Ravaged by nature, desecration, and neglect, it was nearly destroyed by an earthquake in 1927. Hence, in so many ways, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was hardly the quintessential shrine one expected in all of Christendom to be. Yet it remains a living, breathing beacon of faith, its ancient stones steeped in prayers, hymns and liturgies.

Angel Therapy: A call for help from beyond the realm

Whether you're stuck in a situation or simply seeking comfort, angels everywhere are waiting to help you

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Beyond the realm of reality, that we know and sense as human beings on Earth, is an omnipresent realm, unseen to humans, where guiding angels are waiting to assist humans. "When it comes to Angel Therapy, there's a misguided notion in India that angels are associated with christianity but the concept of angels exists across religions. Even when you go to Shirdi, the image of Sai Baba features angels on the top," says Sunita Singad, one of India's first qualified Angel Therapy practitioner. However, she is quick to point out that Angel Therapy is not something religious nor is there a need for angels to be worshipped.

To understand the concept of angels better, Singad suggests thinking of the qualities one would want in a best friend. "Angels are your personal friends. They are here to help you. Everyone, at some point in their life, has faced challenges be it personal, health, financial or professional, when all options have been exhausted and they have felt a profound need for assistance. It's moments such as these when angels intervene with their assistance," explains Singad. "Everyone is given a spiritual experience some time in their life to open them up to the other world," concurs Sameeta Nanjiani, a certified teacher for angel healing.

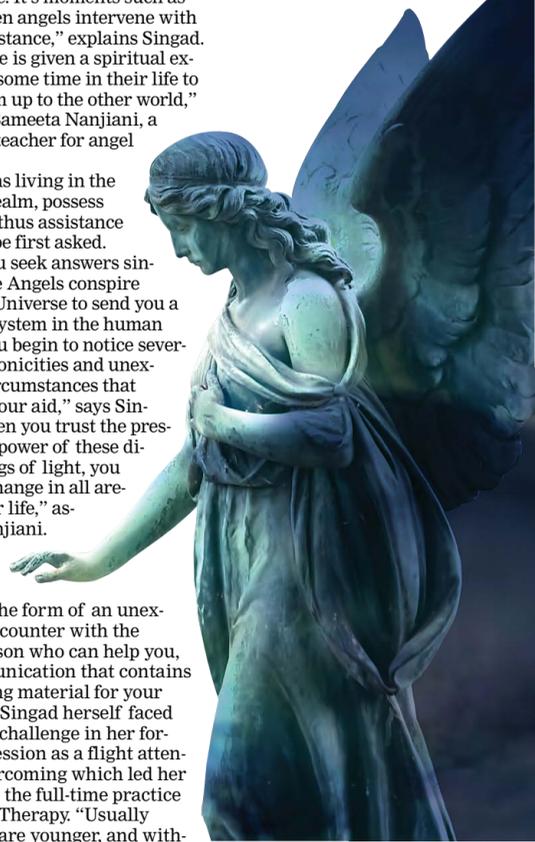
Humans living in the earthly realm, possess free will, thus assistance needs to be first asked. "Once you seek answers sincerely, the Angels conspire with the Universe to send you a support system in the human world. You begin to notice several synchronicities and unexpected circumstances that come to your aid," says Singad. "When you trust the presence and power of these divine beings of light, you feel the change in all areas of your life," assures Nanjiani.

Help from angels can come in the form of an unexpected encounter with the right person who can help you, or communication that contains supporting material for your problem. Singad herself faced one such challenge in her former profession as a flight attendant, overcoming which led her to turn to the full-time practice of Angel Therapy. "Usually when we are younger, and with-

WHAT IS THIS?

Angel therapy is a non-denominational spiritual healing method that involves working with your guardian angels and archangels. According to practitioners everyone has guardian angels and connecting with them helps create more peace in life. Practitioners say connecting with your angels feels like meeting family and reuniting with your best friends.

out any preconceived notions, we have a better connect with our angels. There are often times when people have felt the assistance of angels in their life but because they do not have an understanding of what's happening, they miss out on the signs," says Singad who conducts workshops and readings to help people find the answers they are looking for and develop a stronger connection with their angels. Nanjiani too, who formerly belonged to the corporate world for 15 years, is now a qualified Master Angel Teacher.



in brief

Cal mosques receive hateful threat letters

Hateful letters calling for the genocide of Muslims and praising President-elect Donald Trump have been received by several mosques in the US state of California, raising concerns among the community members for their safety. The Council on American-Islamic Relations has called for increased police protection of local mosques after the letters were sent to multiple California mosques this week. — PTI

Guam archbishop wants to help heal US territory

The new leader of the Catholic church in Guam met with his brother priests as his first order of business on Sunday as he attempted to heal the US territory rocked by allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of clergy and the current archbishop. Archbishop Michael Byrnes, 58, of Detroit has been replaced by current Archbishop Anthony S Apuron who at 71 years old has been

Guam's highest Catholic leader for 30 years. — AP

Attackers paint swastikas in Stockholm mosque

At a Stockholm mosque just after morning prayers on Saturday, unidentified attackers burst into the building, spray painting swastikas and hate speech on the walls and throwing firecrackers, police said. All the worshippers had left the mosque at the time of the attack except one, and he was shaken but unharmed, mosque officials told Swedish news agency TT. — PTI

Hindu pilgrims cancel Pak trip due to tension

About 200 Hindu pilgrims in India cancelled their trip to Pak as they were not allowed to undertake the journey due to ongoing tension between the countries, an official said on Saturday. The visas were issued by Pakistan High Commission for the trip to holy Katas Raj temple in Chakwal district near Islamabad. — PTI

Why do religious extremists attack art?

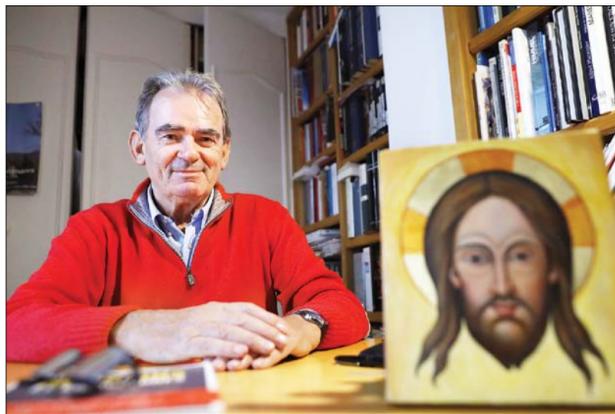
Jihadists from the Islamic State group have destroyed ancient sites and museum pieces in Syria and Iraq in the last two years but that is just the latest example of extremists attacking religious buildings or art.

Historian Francois Boespflug, a French former Catholic priest, talks about the root of attacks against images that perpetrators consider to be blasphemous.

Common thread

What is the common thread between the destruction of the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001, the mausoleums of Timbuktu in Mali by Al-Qaeda and two of the most important temples in Palmyra, Syria by the IS?

When an image is considered to convey contempt or is the object of a cult that extremists consider fetishist, they react as if they have been insulted themselves. Destroying artefacts in Mosul should be the least of the jihadists' strategic concerns. They want to cultivate their reputation as ultra-pious Muslims, faithful to the Quran — condemning idols is almost a *leitmotiv*. But it has a double bonus for extremists because it allows them to thumb their noses at the West and to all those who love art for art's sake.



Historian Francois Boespflug, a French former Catholic priest, talks about fundamentalist groups adopting a form of pious spreading of the Christian message using representations

Christianity's art
Divine representation is banned in the holy scriptures, so how does one explain Christianity's creation of such a large body of artistic work?

Christianity started off, without any images, keeping true to the Jewish tradition. Judaism, because it has never been in the position of the dominant political power, has been far less iconoclastic. The two religions that have been the most iconoclastic are Islam

and Christianity — in the latter case, with the destruction of effigies of pagan gods. Christians felt liberated from the Ten Commandments ban — insofar as God became man, it seemed almost contrary to never represent him.

In name of blasphemy

This tolerance from the Catholic Church has not prevented Catholic fundamentalists from rejecting art. What is behind this? Most Christian extremists who act

in this way claim they do so because of blasphemy. In Christian religion there is a kind of hierarchy of images to be respected: God the Father and Jesus are at the top, then comes the Virgin Mary with child. While the scenes in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Hail Mary* (note: in which the director brings a virgin birth into a modern setting) were quite modest, protesters who set fire to a cinema showing the film in the French city of Tours in 1985 were expressing an attitude of 'get your hands off the Holy Mary'

Art for fundamentalists?

Are fundamentalist groups tempted to transform art into an instrument of influence or propaganda? Many of these movements adopt a form of pious spreading of the Christian message, using representations that do not purport to be artistic: they are Sulpician images, a little kitsch. You find them in the United States among Pentecostal movements or in the Mormon faith, whose iconography is dripping with sentimentality. They feel rather uncomfortable about abstraction of the sort you find in the Rothko Chapel in Texas with its large quintessential flat surfaces.

We have to understand the function of religious art is not about wrongdoing, but rather instruction, emotion and recollection. — AFP