



COSY CORNER/
JANINE DI GIOVANNI

Holy rest

Foreign correspondent
Janine di Giovanni finds
sanctuary in churches.

By Henry Rees-Sheridan
Photography Landon Speers

In December of 1992, Janine di Giovanni was travelling through the Balkan peninsula reporting on the internecine conflict that had erupted there the previous year. On Christmas Eve she found herself in a church in Sarajevo. “All the Catholic soldiers came down from the frontline and went to midnight mass to avoid the Serbs’ bombing,” she says. “It was held at a secret location. It was one of the most moving things I’ve ever experienced, to hear the ‘Ave Maria’ and see the frontline soldiers going to receive communion.”

Di Giovanni has reported from dozens of warzones over three decades and is now senior fellow and lecturer in human rights at Yale. She recently moved to New York after 15 years in Paris. MONOCLE meets her at St Jean Baptiste Roman Catholic Church, a stone’s throw from her home on the Upper East Side. She is warm, intense and candid about her life as a war correspondent.

Raised within a churchgoing Catholic family in New Jersey, Di Giovanni stopped attending services when she left for university. But the rites of her parents’ religion have clearly endured: she crosses herself with holy water from a font as we leave. After that Christmas in Sarajevo, churches became an important part of her life all over again. “You can always find one no matter where you are. There’s something amazingly grounding and healing about being in a church, even during wartime.”

Amid the horrors of conflict, churches haven’t always been places of repose. Di Giovanni tells us that during the 1994 massacres in Rwanda “people hid in churches seeking sanctuary from the genocide, only to be murdered there”. In 2016 the country’s Catholic Church apologized for its role in the violence.

Di Giovanni’s reporting has been informed by her experiences in churches. During the reign of Saddam Hussein she



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The CV:

1992

Moves to Bosnia to live in besieged Sarajevo. Reports on Balkan wars for following decade

1994

Reports Rwandan genocide; works in Africa during 1990s

2000

Witnesses fall of Grozny, Chechnya. One of three foreigners inside the country. Banned from Russia

2001

Witnesses fall of Taliban in Afghanistan

2015

The Morning they Came for us: Dispatches from Syria published and translated into 30 languages. Banned from Syria

2018

Becomes senior fellow and lecturer in human rights at Yale University

spent time worshipping alongside Assyrian Christians in Mosul, who were praying to try and stop the US invasion of Iraq. “Traditionally Christians in the Middle East side with dictators, like Hussein, who offer them protection,” she says. “When the dictators fall it often leaves them vulnerable.” In recent years she’s spoken to Syrian Christians who support Bashar al-Assad for precisely the same reason.

Attending church also means Di Giovanni doesn’t have to subscribe to the myriad wellness fads on offer in New York. “People spend thousands of dollars to go to spas and retreats. But at every corner there’s a church or a temple or a mosque, where you can find the same thing very simply.”

Her attachment to churches is less about religious observance and more about being able to always find a home, even when she’s in a strange land. “No matter how alone you are, you go to church and you feel that the other people there are also looking for something. They are questers. I have been a quester my whole life.” — (M)