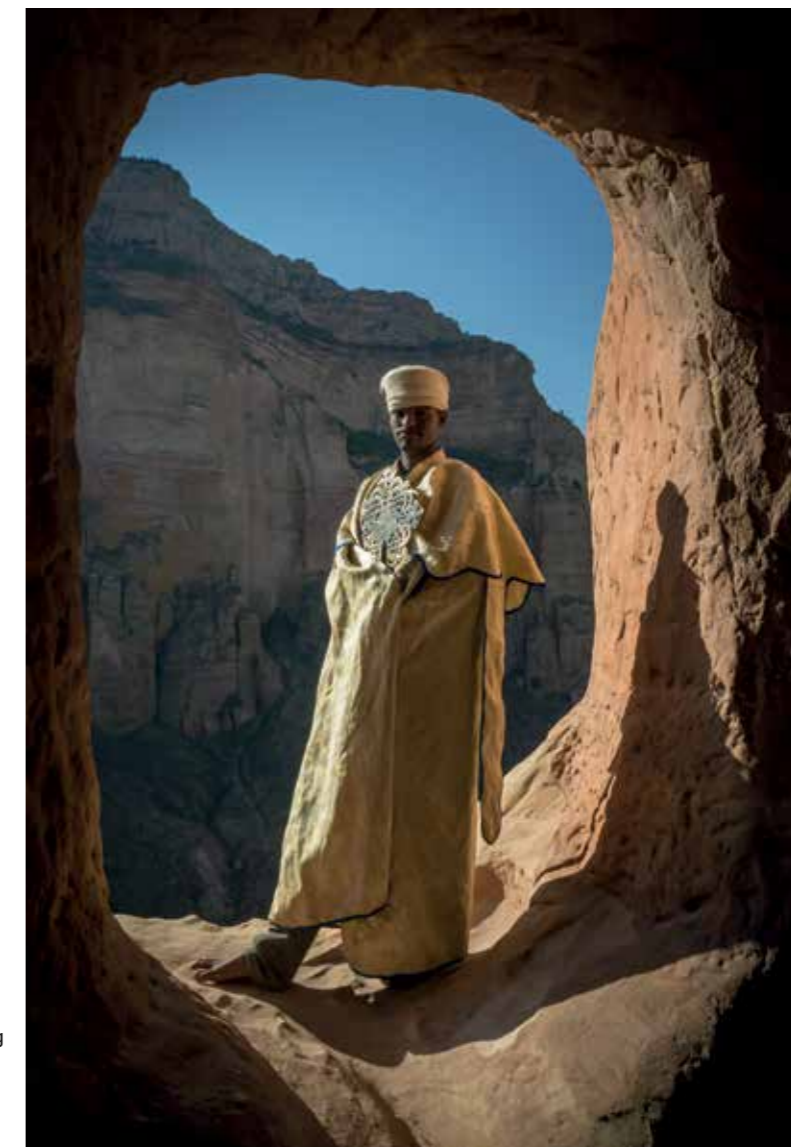




BELIEF IN ACTION

For an ambitious and ongoing five-year project, Society member Christopher Roche has been photographing faith traditions, some of which are now threatened by globalisation and climate change



Clockwise, from far left: Sunning the Buddha at Labrang; Priests at dawn, Christmas Day, Lalibela; The Priest of Abuna Yemata

'I DECIDED I WOULD EXPLORE LESSER-KNOWN FAITH TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD, FOCUSING ON OUR COMMON HUMANITY'

I've worked in the film industry for most of my professional career, but photography has been a passion since I was a kid. In 2014 I decided to take it more seriously and explore a theme of some depth and substance, one that would keep me inspired over a long period.

Five years earlier I had been invited on a trek through the Spiti Valley, a remote Buddhist enclave in northern India. Enamoured by the landscape and culture I returned home, held my first exhibition, and decided devotion would be my theme.

I chose to explore lesser-known faith traditions around the world, focusing on our common humanity rather than dogma. My first location was Ethiopia,

with its mystical history and tales of the Ark of the Covenant. I researched the traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and made two trips to the northern highlands, photographing the festivals of Genna and Timkat (Christmas and Epiphany) as well as the hidden mountaintop churches of Tigray.

At times the trip was challenging, especially when I stumbled upon tour groups of photographers in Lalibela at Christmas. However, few of them stayed up to witness the 100,000 white-robed pilgrims who keep an all-night candlelit vigil.

Returning to London, a Kickstarter campaign enabled me to self-publish a book, *The Priests and Pilgrims of Ethiopia*. I held another exhibition and

won a couple of awards that encouraged me to keep going with my project.

My next planned destination was Mount Kailash in Tibet, a holy location for four different religions, but the Chinese authorities had closed the border. So instead I turned to Varanasi on the banks of the Ganges, the holiest city in India, where seemingly all the country's colour and noise are condensed into one place.

The Hindu faith infuses every aspect of life and death, and in Varanasi there is a real blurring of the boundaries between public and private expressions of belief. With time on my side, I was able to build up relationships with the boatmen and sādhus (religious ascetics or holy men).

CREDIT SITS IN BOX 4MM DEEP



AUTHOR PROFILE
Christopher Roche was born in Quebec, Canada, to Irish parents. Roche has worked in the film industry in Rome and Dublin, and now divides his time between directing TV advertisements and film projects, and working on his photography.

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WIN A COPY OF BANARAS HOLY CITY

To be in with a chance of being one of five winners of a copy of Christopher Roche's *Banaras Holy City* send us your answer to the following question:

Through which two countries does the Ganges flow?

Send your answer to RPS Journal, Think, Suite 2.3, Red Tree Business Suites, 33 Dalmarnock Road, Glasgow G40 4LA or email rpsjournal@thinkpublishing.co.uk



Clockwise, from this image: Baba Luxman, morning puja; Manikarnika Ghat; Lali Baba



elderly people come to make the city their final resting place.

Next came the Amdo region of Tibet and the great Monlam Prayer Festival. In the heart of winter it attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims to the cham dances that relate Buddhist teachings, and to ceremonies such as the 'sunning of the Buddha', when a giant thangka (tapestry) of the Buddha is rolled down a mountainside. I also witnessed women prostrating their way along the icy road from Labrang to Lhasa, a journey that would take them months. The humility, humour and dedication of these pilgrims was incredibly moving.

In February this year I went to Iranian Kurdistan to witness a pre-Islamic ceremony believed to date back to Zoroastrian times, the wedding festival of a legendary character, Pir-e-Shaliar. This festival attracts dervishes from the surrounding mountain villages who dance themselves into a trance after a great feast.

In June, I headed for the Peruvian Andes, where 80,000 pilgrims participate in the festival of Qoyllur Rit'i, a mix of Catholicism and Incan traditions held at an altitude of around 5,000m. I hiked up the holy Sinakara glacier at night to capture devotees descending at dawn into the valley below, carrying crosses on their backs. I believe these ancient practices will not exist in the same form for much longer, as they are being altered by the effects of globalisation, mass tourism, political oppression and global warming.

One sādhu in particular sticks in my memory – Baba Luxman. After visiting his little chai stall for a week I asked someone to translate that I would like to photograph him. He grunted 'yes'; I suggested he ignore me and carry on as normal. He promptly stripped off and jumped into the Ganges, one of the most polluted rivers in the world.

I think he knew I couldn't get a good photograph from the bank and wanted to see how serious I was. I had no choice but to strip off and follow him in, the water lapping at my chin as I took his portrait (shown above).

I was also lucky enough to get permission to photograph burning ghats, something that is usually taboo. Day and night, throughout the year, the dead are burned here. It is believed that to die in Varanasi guarantees liberation from the endless cycle of life and death, so ill and



Burning is learning, Manikarnika Ghat

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Morning puja at the Shiva temple

Throughout the project the best moments have been when I've connected deeply with the subject, whether it's a landscape or a person. If the subject realises I've seen their inner beauty and dignity, I feel I've succeeded at what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to capture something beneath the surface.

A lot of suffering has been caused in the name of religion over the centuries – and a lot of good too. I'm not making any judgement or argument, I'm just photographing people practising, or getting involved in, a major aspect of our shared humanity.

Christopher Roche was talking to David Clark

Banaras Holy City by Christopher Roche is published by Prestel. Both this book and *The Priests and Pilgrims of Ethiopia* are available from chrisrochephotographer.com

'IF THE SUBJECT REALISES I'VE SEEN THEIR INNER BEAUTY AND DIGNITY, I FEEL I'VE SUCCEEDED AT WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO'



Monks attending the great Monlam Prayer Festival in Tibet

CELEBRATING SPIRITUALITY

With Faith Through a Lens competition judge Don McCullin HonFRPS



The positive effects of faith in communities are celebrated in the annual Faith Through a Lens competition, which is open to UK-based amateur photographers. This year's winners were announced on 16 November.

'The judges are looking for images that bring out a connection with people's faith and beliefs, which is something we need now more than ever, in my opinion,' says Don McCullin HonFRPS, who has led the judging panel since 2010.

● For more information see faiththroughalens.co.uk



OVERALL WINNER

The Gathering by Simon Hathaway

'Everything about this picture is beautiful. Even though Simon was shooting against the light, he's managed to retain the richness of the occasion. It was taken in Lalibela, Ethiopia, where I've been many times.'



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Prayer in the Wind by Richard Hainsworth

'This photograph, taken in Tibet, shows people putting up prayer flags which contain their thoughts about love, peace and kindness. The light is always crystal clear and brittle at these high altitudes and this picture is very bright and colourful. Richard has composed the picture well and the flags are a joy to the eye.'



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Running Late by Sanjay Gupta

'These kinds of robes often have a sinister feel, but here the photographer has captured an amusing moment as two people rush through the back streets to take part in a traditional procession in Seville, Spain.'

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