

Beyond belief

by Peter Stanford



Christopher Roche: Devotion

H Club Gallery, London

It is often the rituals of faith that draw us in, and hold us steady, when everything else turns and churns inside and out. There are times when the essential mystery of God comes alive; and when these rituals take place against spectacular backdrops, there is an added dimension. That is what award-winning London-based, Canadian-born photographer Christopher Roche, explores in *Devotion*, an exhibition that runs for one-week only (14-19 May) in London's fashionable H Club Gallery.

Roche has been on a five-year pilgrimage with his camera – from Tibet, through India, the North Caucasus and Iranian Kurdistan, to Ethiopia and Peru – seeking out moments in the world's faith traditions when the intimate and epic, and the private and the public, are as one. The results are photographs that, in the best sense, become pictures.

His close-ups of those going about their devotions are the most immediately striking. *Pilgrim With Candle and Bible* catches a prayerful Ethiopian Orthodox visitor to the extraordinary complex of thousand-year-old churches hewn out of the rock at Lalibela. In its simplicity, it is outside time. If Moses had had a camera, he could have taken this one.

Just as dateless is *Baba Luxman*, a head and shoulders' portrait, all beard, braids and wrinkles, of a Hindu sadhu, or sage, making his morning act of worship in the holy but polluted River Ganges in Varanasi, said to be the home of Lord Shiva. Roche must have had to go into the waters with the sadhu to get the shot, and there is throughout the exhibition a pleasing sense of him both observing and immersing himself in the devotions.

Technically the most impressive picture is *Dance of the Dervishes*, taken in Kurdistan, when holy ascetics came from the surrounding mountains to join a Sufi Muslim celebration with roots stretching back into Zoroastrianism. It is the way that the camera catches the motion of their matted, flowing, gyrating hair that is so beguiling, as they dance and chant themselves into a trance to come closer to Allah.

And for sheer epic quality, *Sunning the Buddha* conveys how individual devotion adds up in a vast crowd to something more. Taken at Labrang in the Amdo region of Tibet during the centuries-old Monlam Prayer Festival (banned by the Chinese authorities from the capital Lhasa), a giant thangka (or tapestry) of the Buddha is unfurled down a mountainside, revealing itself both to the skies and to the thousands gathered below. The vibrant purple-pink vestments of the monks in the foreground are in stark contrast with the granite-grey encircling mountains.

Each photograph is lesson, revelation and meditation combined – teaching how other faith traditions carry out their rituals, challenging us to recognise common ground beyond the obvious differences, and asking what it means, to billions on this fragile planet, to have belief.