Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism

Bruce Masters
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 222 pages.

In this interesting and well-researched book, Bruce Masters analyses the history of Christian and Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire's Arab provinces and how they fared within a Muslim majority and hierarchy. By and large, this important study is a story of modernization, identity, and ecclesiastical politics that focuses primarily on Christian communities in Aleppo, Syria. The book's main themes are somewhat familiar: How Christian and Jewish communities were in an advantageous position to benefit from increasing European influence in the Middle East, and how a secular political identity (Arab nationalism) emerged in the Levant. The book's value lies not in its overarching thesis, but rather in the details of the story and the impressive research upon which this well-crafted narrative is based.

Masters chronicles how the identities of Christians and Jews evolved due to their increasing contact with western influences, or, as Masters labels it, "intrusion." The status quo was forever transformed because many Christians began to distance themselves, economically and socially, from their Muslim neighbors. Masters, a historian who teaches at Connecticut's Wesleyan University, contends that the western intrusion altered Muslim attitudes toward native Christians. In the nineteenth century, local Christians would serve for some Muslims as "convenient surrogates for the anger that could only rarely be expressed directly against the Europeans."

Although the Arab provinces experienced serious sectarian strife in the nineteenth century, these antagonisms were, by and large, absent in the

early twentieth century, when the Ottoman Empire was crumbling. In light of the Empire's impending collapse, Masters contends that these Christian and Jewish communities chose to embrace a collective identity that created a space for them within the wider Muslim majority that expressed itself in a secular political identity, such as Arabism or Ottomanism. Hence in the first decades of the twentieth century, Muslims and non-Muslims in the Arab provinces avoided ruptures along religious lines and the ensuing ethnic conflict in neighboring Anatolia and the Balkans.

The work is organized chronologically. After a lucid introduction that defines the book's parameters, Masters reviews the social and legal status of non-Muslims in the first chapter. This brief and succinct discussion discusses the notion of tolerance and the concept of *ahl al-dhimmah* in Islamic law. The second chapter provides an interesting overview of the Levant's sects and peoples, and includes useful population statistics.

After setting the stage, Masters proceeds with a detailed account of the western intrusion, through merchants and missionaries, in the seventeenth century. He pays particular attention to the Uniate Catholics of Aleppo, and suggests that because the Catholics separated from the Greek Orthodox Church, they could capitalize on the increasing French presence in Aleppo and thus became the prototypical bourgeoisie in the fledgling commercial city. His discussion continues with a gripping account of the nineteenth century's "*millet* wars" (riots). The focus is primarily Aleppo in 1850, though Masters also discusses sectarian conflicts in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860. In Aleppo, Christian casualties were relatively low despite the wholesale sacking of prosperous Christian quarters.

But the riots' psychological effects had a far-reaching effect. As he asserts in the penultimate chapter, these events had a sobering impact on Syria's Muslim elites and might have contributed to the articulation, by both Christian and Muslim intellectuals, of an Arab national identity that superceded earlier religiously based identities. The common denominator, as expressed in the literature of the *nahdah* (renaissance), was rooted in classical Arabic culture, which sought to reconcile and unite Syria's diverse religious communities.

What is particularly positive about this work is that Masters gives agency to Middle Easterners. He does not portray them, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, as passive recipients of a transforming world order imposed by Europeans, but rather as active agents involved in negotiating a new reality to both cope with and benefit from change. Since his study is based squarely on the context of Ottoman history, Masters sees the roots of

sectarianism and the transformation of the status of non-Muslims emerging much earlier than previous studies have maintained. Many of the general arguments presented do sound familiar. The book's strength lies in demonstrating how some of these themes were negotiated in certain communities within the Ottoman Empire.

This subject is not an easy topic. Masters points out that "to write or not to write about the history of non-Muslims living in Muslim states has become, and perhaps always was, all too often a political act." The study of this topic is made even more difficult because Ottoman Muslim literary sources are largely silent about the non-Muslims among whom the authors lived. Yet Masters overcomes this silence with his impressive usage of various archival sources, such as court records, those of the Patriarchate (official records of the Christian Orthodox Church), and also of various contemporary Christian, Jewish, and Muslim writers.

This is an important book that will contribute greatly to the social history of the Ottoman Empire. In addition, it will be very useful for scholars conducting research in other areas of the Empire.

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