Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East [Review]

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

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Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East [Review]

Abstract
Compared to their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, Christian missionaries in the modern Middle East affected relatively few formal conversions. Nevertheless, in the past 15 years, scholars have begin to appreciate how missionaries in the Middle East exerted far-reaching cultural, political, and economic influences on the region, through schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Scholars have also begin to appreciate how missionaries variously strengthened, mediated, and deflected forms of European and American imperialism, while forging long-distance connections between the Middle East and their home countries.

Disciplines
African History | Christianity | History of Religions of Eastern Origins | Islamic World and Near East History | Missions and World Christianity | Near Eastern Languages and Societies

Comments
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with short quotations from philosophers, sociologists, and other thinkers to support this analysis. The modern state is an amoral entity based on positivism that exists solely for its own perpetuation. In order to survive, it demands the complete adherence of its citizens, and concepts such as the rule of law and separation of powers are subordinate to, and ineffective constraints on, the political, cultural, economic, and legal instruments of the state’s “will to power.” There is no idea or goal greater than the survival of the state; the Is and the Ought are irreconcilable, and the latter has no relevance to the functioning of the state.

The shari’a admits of no such separation between the Is and the Ought. It is a comprehensive approach to individual and communal life in which the moral imperative is always present and indeed dominates the legal, political, cultural and social aspects of society. Resting primarily on the five pillars of religion (shahada, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and almsgiving), the shari’a focuses on shaping and developing the individual as a moral being. What binds the law together with political rule is the overarching concept of God’s sovereignty. This means that paradigmatic Islamic governance exists not as an end in itself, but as a means to develop fully the divinely mandated moral content of the community and the individual subject. The idea of Islamic governance, “nurturing the community qua Community and serving its interests as a morally constituted entity” (pp. 139–40), is therefore fundamentally at odds with the concept of the modern state.

Professor Hallaq’s arguments are well-constructed and thought-provoking, and the depth of his knowledge of both Western and Islamic political and legal thought is evident throughout. The postmodern critique of the modern state is compelling, though readers unfamiliar with the works of such philosophers as Alasdair MacIntyre may find that the discussion requires careful and repeated scrutiny, with frequent reliance on the many endnotes. Despite its short length, this is not a book to be absorbed in one quick reading.

In 1988, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared that the interests of the Islamic state would whenever necessary supersede the application of the shari’a (e.g., prayer, pilgrimage, and fasting). This remarkable statement was taken by many to mean the demise of the experiment of Islamic governance in Iran. Readers of this book would not find such a development at all surprising. It is an important contribution to understanding the role and potential of the shari’a in the modern world.

Mark D. Welton, Professor Emeritus, United States Military Academy at West Point


Reviewed by Heather J. Sharkey

Compared to their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, Christian missionaries in the modern Middle East affected relatively few formal conversions. Nevertheless, in the past 15 years, scholars have begun to appreciate how missionaries in the Middle East exerted far-reaching cultural, political, and economic influences on the region, through schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Scholars have also begun to appreciate how missionaries variously strengthened, mediated, and deflected forms of European and American imperialism, while forging long-distance connections between the Middle East and their home countries.

In Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion, Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon recount the history of Christian missions in the Middle East in light of this burgeoning scholarship. Noting that most works on missionaries have focused on particular countries, missions, or periods, Tejirian and Simon aim to survey “the entire landscape of Western missions — Roman Catholic as well as Protestant, European as well as American, their impact on the region, and the effect of their activity on other aspects of Western involvement in the Middle East” (p. ix). They do so in a dense and fast-paced chronicle of missionary history.
The authors begin their survey with the career of Jesus and his disciples, and end around 1920. They cover the history of early Christianity, the Crusades, the Protestant Reformation, and Catholic Counter-Reformation, before surveying the activities of both Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. American Protestant missionaries feature as the most dynamic characters in their narrative — the most pedagogically innovative, the most diverse, and also, in many ways, the quirkiest.

The vast temporal scope of this book makes it possible for the authors to trace continuities and recurring themes in this history of Christian missions. For example, to illustrate the persisting importance of the Crusades for European Christian imaginations, the authors describe Kaiser Wilhelm’s visit to Jerusalem in 1898. The goal of this visit was to bolster Ottoman-German relations, though it probably did more to fulfill the Kaiser’s Orientalist fantasies. “Dressed in a white costume evocative of the Teutonic knights and with a golden eagle atop his helmet,” they write, “Wilhelm rode into Jerusalem through a breach in the walls that had been prepared especially for his entourage” (p. 117).

If anyone questions the importance of the history of Christian missions to the modern Middle East, then a quick look at this densely detailed book will dispel doubts. The authors succeed in showing how Christian missions have inextricably connected the religious, cultural, and political history of this region over the past two millennia. At the same time, they distill current scholarship on the subject, making the book valuable to those who work at the intersection of Christian studies and diplomatic history.

Heather J. Sharkey is Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire (Princeton University Press, 2008).


Reviewed by Michael M. Gunter

This is a richly nuanced, balanced analysis of the influential Gülen movement, a “transnational religious network of schools, finance and community services” (p. 248) that “might be termed the first quasi-Protestant version of Islam” (p. 10). Spawned from the philosophy of Said Nursî (1873–1960), an enlightened Kurdish Sufi mystic, Fethullah Gülen’s (b. 1941) “key and controversial assumption is that individuals must be pious in order to be good citizens… that scientific curiosity is compatible with Islamic concerns …[and] that one can be a democrat and in favor of civil society out of religious convictions” (p. 8). Thus, “the significance of the Gülen movement is that it has not only vernacularized the ideas of Enlightenment, but . . . also turned them into a religio-social movement” (p. 6). “Gülen has forged a cohesive …social movement stressing individual character formation and community building, with the goal of catalyzing an Islamic renaissance compatible with the needs of the modern world” (p. 15).

Following its contextually stimulating introduction, Professor Yavuz’s study consists of three parts: Man, Movement, and Meaning. The shorter first part examines Gülen’s life story and key concepts such as Islam, morality, the good life and community, modernity, democracy, pluralism, and nationalism within Islam.