Embracing the Divine: Passion and Politics in the Christian Middle East

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In this vividly rendered book, Akram Khater presents a fascinating account of an eighteenth-century woman who challenged Maronite and Roman Catholic conventions to pursue a career as a nun and to found a convent and religious order in Mount Lebanon. Roman Catholic missionaries who reached the Levant in this period thought that local Christians should try to apprehend Christ more rationally and personally than the traditional way of Eastern Christians. But they did not bargain for Hindiyya al-‘Ujaimi.

Born in 1720 to a wealthy Maronite merchant family in Aleppo, Hindiyya al-‘Ujaimi developed what she later described as an intimate relationship with Christ. Christ first appeared to her, she claimed, when she was eight years old, and made frequent visits and professions of love thereafter. Their relationship eventually took a physical turn. Years later, an anonymous eighteenth-century chronicler, summarizing a lost or hidden account of her experiences called *The Secret of the Union*, matter-of-factly recorded that, “on the fourth of February, 1759…Hindiyya felt the body of Jesus Christ unite with her body…and she felt as if her whole body was on fire.” Paraphrasing this source further, Khater writes that “Christ then invited her to kiss his sacred body and to sing a hymn to each of its parts” (p. 177). To an inquisitor sent from Rome, Hindiyya also described the
palpably physical nature of this relationship. “I felt that with his [Christ’s] eyesight he penetrated my soul, heart and body with a strong thrust that made me feel blood flowing in my veins and sense every bone and joint in my body” (p. 171).

Hindiyya’s provocative religiosity prompted the Vatican to send not one, but two, inquisitions to investigate her – in 1753 and again in 1778. On both occasions papal delegates examined not only her claimed sightings and physical experiences of Christ but also reports about her mistreatment of nuns. The second inquisition occurred, in fact, when two nuns in Hindiyya’s convent died following torture, leading to an exposé that involved allegations of satanic behavior and of same-sex and other-sex liaisons among the nuns. Much to the frustration of the Vatican and its emissaries, Hindiyya refused to sign the confession that Catholic authorities drafted in 1778. The council of the Propaganda Fide in Rome nevertheless ordered the dissolution of her order, the closure of all convents affiliated with it, and the banishment of Hindiyya herself to an isolated cell, where she lived until her death almost twenty years later, in 1798.

This book is an impressive achievement. Akhram Khater draws extensively on archives in Rome and Lebanon, and writes with verve and humor. He does so while making a case for the far-reaching significance of Hindiyya’s story within the context of greater Syria and the wider Christian world.

For a start, he argues, Hindiyya’s move to assert an emotional and bodily experience of Christ jarred with the emphasis on rationalism that increasingly pervaded Roman Catholicism. Consider, for example, Benedict XIV (1675-1758), who before his elevation to the papacy had “actively supported dissection of human bodies at the
university [of Bologna] for the purpose of advancing the *scienza* of the physiology and pathology of the human body” (p. 140). In 1752, Pope Benedict weighed in to denounce Hindiyya for attracting “imbeciles, fools, or deceived [people]” who accepted her “female hallucinations” about Christ and hailed her as a living saint (pp. 137-39).

Hindiyya’s brand of religiosity also led to friction with a male-dominated Roman Catholic church, whose leaders since the Council of Trent in 1563 had officially emphasized the importance of obedience and quiescence for women in their spiritual life. Not only did Hindiyya establish her order of the Sacred Heart of Jesus without first securing Vatican permission, but also, and more outrageously, as papal delegates later reported, she did things in her convent that only male priests were supposed to do. That is, “she heard confessions, absolved men and women of sin, and went so far as to distribute the Eucharist” (p. 164), that is, the bread and wine meant to represent Christ’s body and blood.

Equally vexing to Roman Catholic leaders was the fact that Hindiyya had such a strong following among Maronite church authorities and humble Christians (who gave generously to her convents despite their poverty). Her growing wealth and popularity bred some resentment, locally and in Rome. Meanwhile, Hindiyya inadvertently helped to strengthen a distinctly modern Maronite identity. “[S]he was the lightning rod for an increasingly self-confident Maronitist movement that was constructing an identity and organization equidistant from Rome and Istanbul and separate from its immediate Ottoman mixed milieu and Western Roman Catholicism” (p. 219).
Akram Khater’s book will become required reading for historians of the Middle East who are interested in Lebanon and Syria, and in the study of Christianity, missionary movements, and women. Unexpectedly, too, for a book about a nun who spent much of her life in a convent, *Embracing the Divine* will appeal to historians of sexuality. For as Khater points out, “practically all discussions about sexuality and sex within the Ottoman Empire during this time period were carried out by men and for men” with women typically presented only as “subjects of the narrative” (p. 181). By contrast, Hindiyya was “unambiguously in control of the dialogue” as the “hakawati, or storyteller” who described her intercourse with Christ. “Her repeated rejection of his advances and his perpetual frustration with her hesitation elucidate, at least, a relationship of equals” (p. 181) – while on other occasions her accounts present her as the dominant partner.

This book is scholarly, nuanced, thought provoking, and in some ways, too, subversive. Readers may find themselves at the end of the story as perplexed about Hindiyya (and about her experiences, motives, and behavior) as the Roman Catholic inquisitors who set out, twice, to investigate her. Readers may be able to accept, in theory, Khater’s argument that Hindiyya’s claim to physical knowledge of Christ was a form of “bodily theology” (p. 176) that “[rang] true in a society where reason and sensibility were not alienated from each other” (p. 237). But they may still find it difficult not to view her through the lens of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century understandings of psychology, mental illness, and trauma.