

Brief Reviews, Winter 2022

by Daniel Pipes

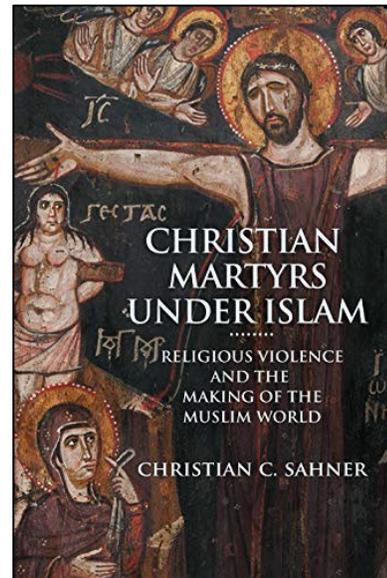
[Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World](#). By Christian C. Sahner. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 335 pp. 39.95 (\$27.95, paper).

Sahner, associate professor of Islamic history at Oxford University, makes innovative use of a familiar but usually ignored source of information on early Islamic history: the hagiographies of around 270 Christians who lost their lives due to their opposition to Islam in the two-century period 660-860 C.E. These “new martyrs” divide into three main categories: born Christians who converted to Islam and then reverted to Christianity; born Muslims who converted to Christianity; and Christians who slandered the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Sahner devotes much attention to the tricky process of interpreting sacred writings to elicit information about history. He argues convincingly that this is possible and that it helps elucidate the process “whereby the predominantly Christian Middle East of late antiquity became the predominantly Islamic region of today.”

He concludes from his research that the rate of conversion of Christians to Islam was distinctly slower and more convoluted than sources written by Muslims suggest:

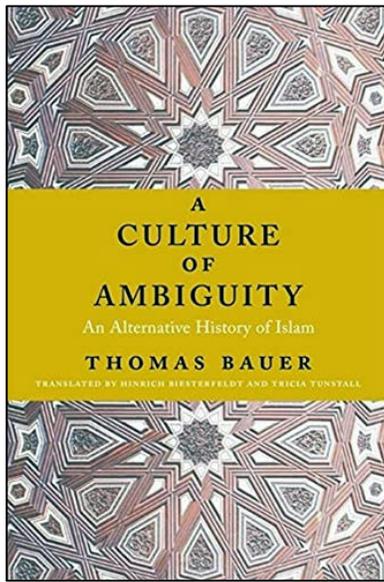
if the great Muslim annalist al-Tabari were all we relied upon to understand the shape of Middle Eastern society in the post-conquest period, we would come



to the erroneous conclusion that nearly everyone in this world had already converted [by 923 C.E.]. Yet this was not the case.

Nor was the conversion of Christians to Islam inevitable; rather, it was “a fragile, contested process.”

Sahner’s work points to the ongoing and creative effort by historians to piece together the early era of Islam through sources other than Arabic manuscripts, depending mainly on artifacts or on contemporary non-Arabic records. It is a grand undertaking that dates back to Ignaz Goldziher’s profound 1880 insight that the vast detail of those Arabic manuscripts does not ensure their accuracy. Bit by bit, the work goes on and the reality of medieval history comes slowly to light.



[A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam.](#) By Thomas Bauer. Trans. by Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 323 pp. \$145.

By the “history of Islam,” Bauer eccentrically means not a chronicle of the religion of Islam nor of its adherents but a contrast between the outlook of Muslims in two long periods of time, 900-1500 and 1800 to the present. Bauer, a professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies (not history) at the University of Münster in Germany has a simple thesis that he grinds away at in myriad ways over hundreds of pages: Pristine Islamic culture celebrated ambiguity in the form of sometimes frivolous amatory poetry or multiple ideas about Qur’anic exegesis. Then along came Western influence to smash that frail and gentle outlook, replacing it with a monomaniacal, persistent, humorless mentality.

In Bauer’s words:

in classical [Islamic] times, the areas of law and religion, language

and literature, ideas about politics and sex, and contact with ‘the stranger’ were characterized by an equanimous acceptance of complexity and ambiguity, and often by an exuberant pleasure in them. This high degree of tolerance of ambiguity vanished, however, and yielded to the *intolerance of ambiguity* that conspicuously marks the present time. Many Western observers of Islamic culture now profess to discern in this intolerance of ambiguity the true face of Islam—although all they see is their own reflection in the mirror. It will be one of the aims of this book to demonstrate that the West had a share in the development of this hostility against ambiguity.

In other words, Islamism is “a caricature of the West’s own ideologization and disambiguation of the world.”

Yawn. Yet another academic conjures up another way to bash the West; Bauer offers himself up to be hailed as the new Edward Said.

Obviously, the West had a vast impact on Muslims and Islam, and obviously, some of it was harmful. This reviewer even wrote a book on one small aspect of that unhappy influence ([conspiracy theories](#)). But the West also had a beneficial impact (the scientific method, say), something Bauer never mentions; and the blame for taking rotten aspects of Western culture surely falls no less on Muslims than on Westerners, something that Bauer’s portrayal of Muslims as people out of the *Arabian Nights* never acknowledges.

If a reader seeks to consume a lengthy, tedious, scholarly, anti-Western screed, *A Culture of Ambiguity* fills the bill. Otherwise, skip it.



Erdoğan's Long Arm in the US: Turkish Influence Operations among American Muslims. By Ahmet S. Yayla. London: The Investigative Journal, 2019. Free PDF download.

Yayla, director of the Center for Homeland Security at DeSales University, discusses Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's two-pronged strategy for manipulating U.S. public opinion to benefit the interests of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP): use Turkish diaspora groups and Muslim-American nonprofits. They work in close consultation with the Turkish state to deny the Armenian genocide, support pan-Islamic goals, undermine Israel, and seek the extradition of Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen.

The author pieces together news reports, leaked emails, government tax data, and first-person accounts for an inside look at these groups and individuals. He describes how "well-established American Muslim groups" began interacting with both existing Turkish

establishments based in the United States and newly-founded Turkish nationalist institutions.

Erdoğan's long term "investment" in the United States was procured through the establishment of Turkish-American non-governmental organizations. Hacked emails tell the story of how Erdoğan's Turkish proxies first pitched the idea of infiltrating "Capitol Hill and the U.S. security establishment through front organizations and lobbyists under the guise of journalism."

Soon after, the Turkish Heritage Organization was born, a nonprofit funded by AKP business interests, which acts as an "unregistered wing of the Turkish government and its ruling political party," controlled with military efficiency by the president's son-in-law Berat Albayrak. The nonprofit is used "as a shell organization to cover spy-like or espionage activities" targeting the Turkish government's critics.

Yayla describes how prominent American Islamist groups once loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood have turned to Erdoğan for support. In return, these institutions echo regime talking points and carry water for the Turkish president.

The U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations, an umbrella of Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups and South Asian extremists, has praised Erdoğan as the "true leader of Ummah" and is "the main support and lobbying group for Erdoğan among U.S. Muslims."

While Yayla does a commendable job describing Erdoğan's reach, he fails to note that, so far, the Turkish president's grasp has mostly failed. Gülen [continues to live](#) comfortably in Pennsylvania; [President Biden](#) and the U.S. [Congress](#) have acknowledged the Armenian genocide, and

Turkey will not be upgrading its air force with [F-35 fighters](#) any time soon.

However, this is small comfort. The AKP has in place a lobbying infrastructure—a veritable army of Islamist think tanks, charities, and civil advocacy groups—and is winning new backers to realize its neo-Ottoman agenda with American help.

Benjamin Baird
Islamist Watch

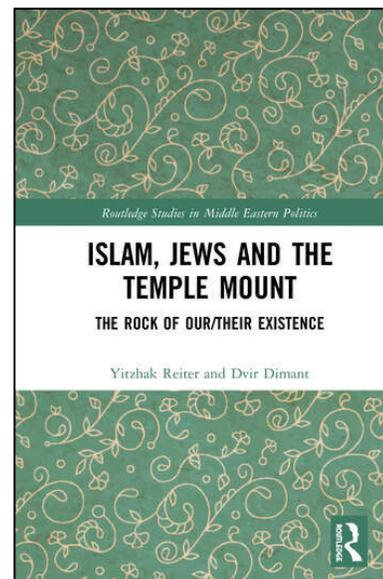
[Islam, Jews and the Temple Mount: The Rock of Our/Their Existence.](#) By Yitzhak Reiter and Dvir Dimant. London: Routledge, 2020. 131 pp. £96 (£29.59, ebook).

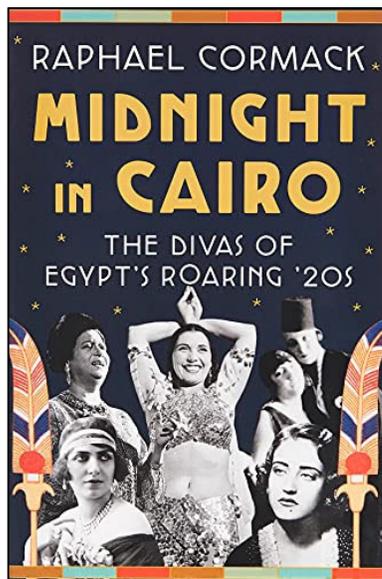
Reiter and Dimant survey over a millennium’s worth of major Muslim sources—histories, geographies, literary works, Islamic texts—on the topic of the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount (Arabic: al-Haram ash-Sharif). Unsurprisingly, they find that Muslims prolifically, consistently, and uncontroversially agreed not only on the validity of that tie but on its foundational importance for the Islamic connection to al-Haram ash-Sharif. “Islam sanctifies Jerusalem and the Temple Mount Compound ... primarily because they were originally sacred to Jews and later to Christians.” Accordingly, “contemporary Muslims who engage in the discourse that denies any Jewish bond to the Temple Mount or to Jerusalem are ignoring and deliberately overlooking, at times even rejecting, fundamental sources of Muslim culture.”

Then they contrast that with the prevalent arguments since 1967 when Israeli troops took control of that sanctuary. Only after that date, it turns out, did the Palestinian

priority to delegitimize Jewish control trump the Islamic need for legitimation. Only then did a vast heritage get dumped for the sake of tactical convenience. Only then did the Big Lie find an international audience as, for example, governments of Muslim-majority countries pressured UNESCO and other international organizations to adopt the Palestinian narrative. Finally, Reiter and Dimant document the few recent authors who have stayed true to the Islamic truths.

The authors make these points swiftly and magisterially in their slender book, leaving no room for argument or excuse. They do so with commendable scholarly restraint, hoping to convince a Muslim audience to return to its moral and religious senses. To which this reviewer adds that the day when Palestinians abandon their core falsehood about the Temple Mount being unconnected to Judaism will mark a major step toward ending the war on Israel.





Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s. By Raphael Cormack. New York: W.W. Norton, 2021. 342 pp. \$28.95.

On arrival in Cairo in 1971, this reviewer threw himself into the life of the city, including the faded, somewhat sad music halls in the Ezbekiya district. Fifty years later, reading how those establishments were founded precisely fifty years earlier and then prospered both brings back memories and puts them into their rightful perspective.

Cormack, who has a Ph.D. in Egyptian theater (who knew such a degree program existed?) from the University of Edinburgh, has thoroughly researched a topic one would have expected lost to archival inquiry: the women at the center of Ezbekiya's demi-monde of nightclubs, dance halls, cabarets, and theaters. They were a diverse lot, coming from a wide range of backgrounds but

sharing both an artistic ambition and outsized resolve.

Take the artiste Rose al-Yousef who arrived in 1912 from today's Lebanon, 14-years-old, penniless, and alone. Through dint of "struggle, mystery, hard work, determination, and more than a little mythologizing," she became a successful actress, then a publisher. The weekly magazine she founded and named after herself (*Ruz al-Yusuf*) still publishes ninety-five years later. In addition, her son, Ihsan Abdel Koudous, and her grandson, Yussef El Guindi, are both significant writers. Thus does her legacy live on.

The story is also full of surprises. "It includes, at different points, a gay English Arts and Crafts designer, several cross-dressing actresses, a belly dancer involved in underground left-wing politics, and an unsuccessful attempt to make a film version of the life of the prophet Mohammed, directed by the man who went on to make *Casablanca*." In brief, "The 1920s and 1930s were an exciting time to be alive in Egypt."

Less so the 1950s. Starting with the January 26, 1952, burning down of much of Ezbekiya, followed by the July 23, 1952, coup d'état that toppled the monarchy and brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, what Cormack calls the "prudish, quasi-puritanical disdain of the modern entertainment industry" brought that industry to its knees, leaving only the worn and forlorn remnants this reviewer witnessed in the early 1970s. "Cairo was now a city populated by a whole new cast of characters: Soviet advisors, African liberation movements, and activists from across the third world."

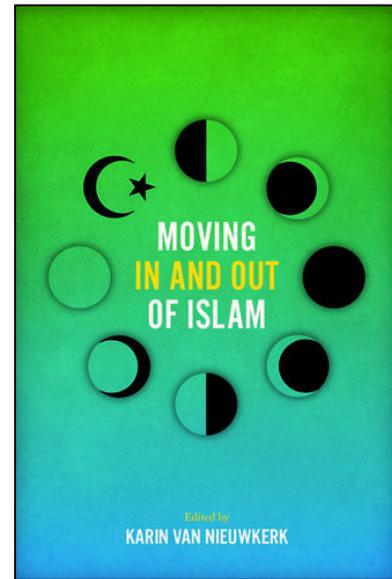
Moving In and Out of Islam. Edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 421 pp. \$105 (\$34.95, paper)

In an unusual combination of topics, van Nieuwkerk, an anthropologist at the Radboud University in the Netherlands, has assembled sixteen empirical case studies of conversion to and deconversion from Islam in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Given however, the multitude of studies on “moving into” Islam, the “moving out of” chapters offer more original information and hold greater interest.

Looking at Britons who became Muslim, then left the faith, Mona Alyedreassy notes that they “found many Muslim cultural practices, attitudes, and behavior to be incompatible with [both] Islamic and British values,” a damning assessment. Further, they complained about “hypocrisy” and “contradictory behavior” among heritage (i.e., born) Muslims. The pressure to be “good Muslims” caused many converts to rebel and abandon Islam. Worse, one complained that “Islam didn’t want you to enjoy your life at all.” Women might celebrate their deconversion by dumping their hijabs and other Islamic paraphernalia at a mosque—or even burning these garments.

Simon Cottee suggests that leaving Islam compares to divorce, then discards that analogy in favor of a homosexual “coming out.” He sums up the experience as “one of trauma and suffering ... a prolonged and psychologically costly process.”

In Egypt, van Nieuwkerk notes, Al-Azhar University initiated a campaign to combat increasing atheism (a study of youths found one out of eight being atheist) and the “silent revolution” that includes women taking off the veil and a trend toward spiritual Sufism, and the growing social acceptance of skepticism and non-belief.



Teemu Pauha and Atefeh Aghaee note that, as of 2014, “apostasy was illegal in twenty-five countries, all of which, except for India, have a Muslim majority” with Iran’s being the only government formally to execute a person for this crime. They look closely at deconverts from Islam and find they form four groups: seekers, rationalists, the disillusioned, and rebels, concluding that “the happiest atheists are often rationalists and the angriest are rebels. The saddest and the most longing, in turn, are found among the seekers.”

The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies. Edited by Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 912 pp. \$145.

Shah of the University of London notes that “the academic field of Qur’anic Studies lags significantly behind the extended range of scholarship that the Bible has attracted.” This collection of essays attempts to close the gap. While it does not remove the study of the Qur’an from the realms of Islamic piety and apologetics, it recognizes how the

Qur'an has also been the subject of historical and textual investigations and provides a general overview of the field as it has developed historically and exists today among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.

The book's fifty-seven essays present a sweeping assessment of the study of the Qur'an. They explore the Qur'an's historical setting and the linguistic environment in which it appeared; its textual transmission, codification, manuscripts, inscriptions, and printed editions; its structural and literary dimensions; its themes and preoccupations; and its political aspects, including a survey of ancient and modern interpretations of its teachings on jihad. Also included are evaluations of translations of the Qur'an into various languages; early, classical, and modern exegesis of the Qur'an; and how minority Islamic sects, including Twelver Shiites, Ismailis, Ibadis, and Sufis have approached the Qur'an.

Many of the essays are striking in their recognition of the work of revisionist scholars such as Christoph Luxenberg, Gunter Lüling, David Powers, and others who have attempted to account for the

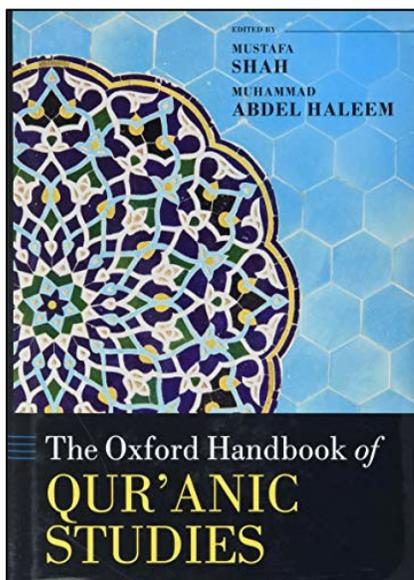
lacunae and curiosities in the canonical account of the origins of the Qur'an and Islam in general, and to provide alternative explanations that resolve some of these anomalies. Not all of their findings are mutually compatible, and the field is still, as Shah notes, in its relative infancy, in large part because those who pursue such investigations could be physically threatened as a result of their perceived challenge to cherished beliefs. Nevertheless, the book provides a useful introduction to the state of these investigations today, even if the authors are frequently unpersuaded by the revisionist arguments. Its best use would be to inspire others to study the work of these scholars for themselves and take their inquiries to the next stage.

Robert Spencer
Jihad Watch

[Prisoner of the Infidels: The Memoir of an Ottoman Muslim in Seventeenth-Century Europe.](#) By Osman of Timisoara. Edited and translated by Giancarlo Casale. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. 199 pp. \$18.95, paper and ebook.

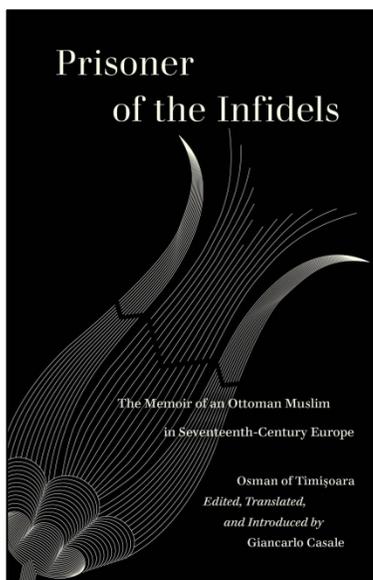
Osman of Timișoara (c.1658-c.1731) began life as a privileged Ottoman living near the border with Christendom, fell captive to the Hapsburgs as a young soldier, spent about twelve years as a prisoner and a slave, rising through the ranks due to his diligence and intelligence. Eventually, he escaped back to Ottoman lands, where he became a translator and ended his career as a distinguished diplomat. In a unique document of its type (and the first-ever Ottoman autobiography), Osman in 1724 wrote down his tale of adventure and accomplishment.

Elegantly presented and scrupulously edited by Casale, associate professor of



history at the University of Minnesota, *Prisoner of the Infidels* makes for compelling reading. Happily lacking the ornate and circumlocutious style typical of his time, Osman's surprising account (the young warrior turns out to be a fine pastry chef?) both informs the modern reader of a very different time and place while raising many questions, for example: the fact that a Muslim slave at one point eats the food left by the Hapsburg emperor; the mysteries of relations between master and slave or Christian and Muslim; or the unpredictable nature of relations with strangers ("no sooner had [the prisoners] boarded the boat and shoved off than the guides killed them, splitting open their bellies"). Then there is Osman's drinking alcohol in public but not eating pork; his successful escape using forged papers; and his warm relations with an ex-master.

In all, it seems that fixed differences for a modern person were far more fluid three hundred years ago. The reader should undertake this trip into time and place with Osman for both his exploits and his learning.



A Revolution in Rhyme: Poetic Co-option under the Islamic Republic. By Fatemeh Shams. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 400 pp. \$85.

Totalitarian regimes take poetry and literature more seriously than democracies: Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, famously wrote excellent mystical odes, published posthumously. More infamously, he issued Salman Rushdie's death sentence because he disliked the author's novel, *The Satanic Verses*. His successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a failed poet turned head of state, courts "revolutionary" poets and assassinates Iran's non-conformist men of letters. As a result, the Islamic Republic has developed a vast bureaucracy to nurture "state sanctioned" poetry and literature as a means of "moral purification" and "surgery of the soul" of the Iranian nation.

In her dissertation-turned-book, Shams, assistant professor of modern Persian literature at the University of Pennsylvania, asks how the relationship between poetry and power affects "the aesthetics, form, and content of the works of those poets who adhere to the regime's ideology." The author, however, appears more interested in poetry than in power.

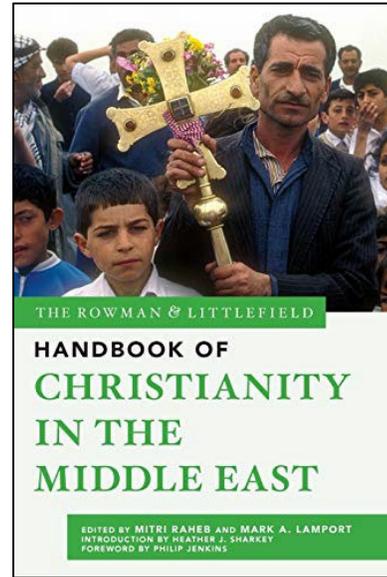
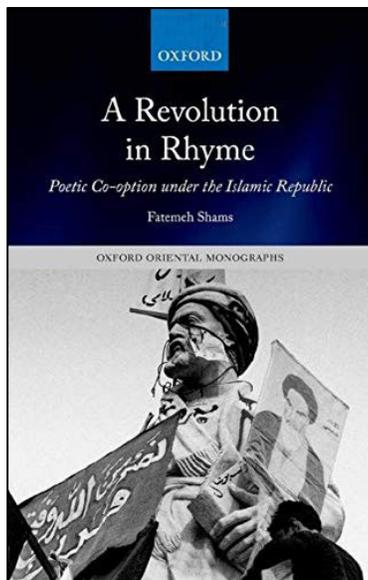
The book provides superb analysis of the works of ten "state sanctioned" poets and the political and social circumstances under which they worked. Selection and translation—along with reprint of the Persian originals—provides non-Persian-speaking readers with excellent insights into the form and content of Iran's approved poetry since 1979.

However, the book's discussion of political decision-makers and bureaucratic institutions nurturing this poetry is limited to a survey of Khamenei's statements on the political role of poetry and literature and an excellent case study of The Center of Islamic

Art and Thought (*Howzeh-ye Honar-va Andisheh-ye Islami*). Apart from short passages on the political programs of presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, there is scant discussion of political priorities of Iranian presidents and prime ministers. Cabinet ministers at the helm of culture and education ministries are hardly mentioned, and budgetary issues and parliamentary debates are largely ignored. Instead, the author makes ample references to theoretical works, which may satisfy a Ph.D. committee, but hardly matter to the reader.

But these shortcomings are not important. What counts is emergence of a scholar who takes “state sanctioned” poetry as seriously as the oppressive regimes nurturing it, and the publication of a book that deserves a readership far beyond those interested in Iranian affairs.

Ali Alfoneh
author of [*Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran*](#)



[The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Christianity in the Middle East](#). Edited by Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport. Lanham, Va.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021. 660 pp. \$165 (\$156.50, ebook).

“This is a book *about* Christianity as it existed and does exist in the Middle East” write the editors in the preface, adding that this story “is nothing less than a surviving jewel.” Philip Jenkins writes in the foreword that the *Handbook* “constitutes a treasury on which scholars will be drawing for decades to come. This is a magnificent contribution.” Heather J. Sharkey adds in her introduction that the volume at hand “attests to the vibrant state of scholarship on Middle Eastern Christianity” and predicts that it “will become a reference for scholars and a touchstone for readers.”

With such self-praise, the work of a reviewer would seem to be rendered superfluous. But studying this massive volume finds that while the entries are predictably uneven, in their totality they do provide a helpful *Handbook*, one

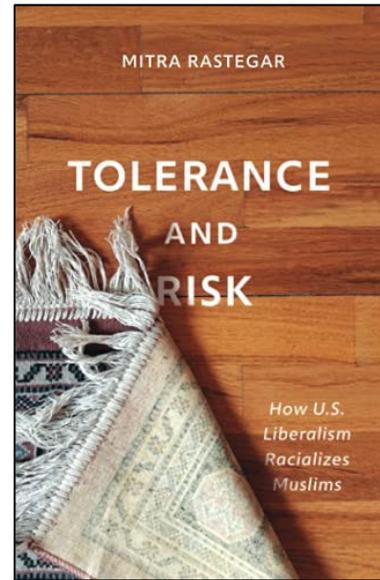
emphasizing facts over ideas, covering many oft-overlooked topics of Middle Eastern Christianity. The forty-six chapters divide into five sections: sociohistorical, religious encounters, contextual expressions, socio-political influences, and country by country. Putting aside the jargon, most readers will probably find a chapter on whatever it is that interests them, from “Missionary Movements in Nisibis, Armenia, and the Silk Road” to “Christian Music and Worship in the Middle East.”

Such a rich assortment made this reviewer starkly aware of his own ignorance about the topic. For example, he knew nothing of the 1724 schism between the followers of Sylvester and Cyril, leading to the formation of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Greek-Melkite Catholic Church of Antioch. Likewise, he was ignorant that Middle East Christians outside the region are estimated to number 7.7 million, with more than 4 million in North America, 2.6 million in Latin America, and more than a half million in Europe. Contrarily, Christian converts from Islam in Saudi Arabia are estimated to number five thousand. Perusing the *Handbook* offers a great deal more.

[Tolerance and Risk: How U.S. Liberalism Racializes Muslims.](#) By Mitra Rastegar. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. 294pp. \$108 (\$27, paper).

If the subtitle, “How U.S. Liberalism Racializes Muslims,” confuses, that is because it originates in an unfamiliar far-left academic outlook. Here is the clearest explanation of Rastegar’s muddy thesis:

Whereas empathy and identification operate to mark



some Muslims as civilized “like us,” others are pushed further into the categories of not simply uncivilized but also incomprehensible, inhuman, and monstrous.

In other words, by praising some Muslims, liberals are in effect condemning others. This, in turn, *racializes* Muslims.

The author, a “clinical associate professor of liberal studies” at New York University, makes her point through “an analysis of broadly circulating media discourses about tolerating and sympathizing with Muslims.” She finds that “articulations of liberal values create lines of distinction ... as they put forth only some Muslims as worthy of tolerance or sympathy.” Indeed, worse than that, “They more broadly function as a policing and disciplining discourse that casts Muslims as tolerable only if they exhibit particular characteristics.”

Examples of this alleged policing make up the bulk of *Tolerance and Risk*. These include, to cite the publisher’s promotional material, “human-interest stories and opinion polls of Muslim Americans, media representations of education activist Malala

Yousafzai, LGBTQ activist discourses, local New York controversies surrounding Muslim-led public projects, and social media discourses of the Syrian refugee crisis.”

Naturally, this reviewer takes a special interest in one local New York controversy, the Kahlil Gibran International Academy, in which he played a small part in 2007. Rastegar devotes thirty-five pages to review this flap in granular detail, grandly concluding from it that “highly affective words that encapsulate a particular threat

most strongly associated with Muslims—irrational, intolerant, Islamically motivated violence—function as bioweapons and tools for assessing particular Muslims.”

In fact, a poorly-conceived project headed by a transparent Islamist was temporarily resisted; what Rastegar’s hysterics conceal is that the KGIA later, predictably, came into existence and [still functions](#). So much for racializing, policing, and bioweapons.

