

***The Politics of Persecution: Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire.* By Mitri Raheb. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021. vii+205. \$24.99 (hardcover).**

In the prefatory pages to his book, Mitri Raheb promises the reader to provide “an alternative interpretation of the history of Middle Eastern Christianity” (p. 3). Throughout his compelling and erudite study, the author indeed delivers on his promise, offering an incisive intervention in the study of Middle Eastern Christianity with a special focus on the oft-accompanying theme of Christian persecution. To this end, the author espouses a region-wide *longue durée* approach that examines “the geopolitical tectonic shifts” taking place in the Middle East starting with the late Ottoman rule until the contemporary era (p. 3). *The Politics of Persecution* not only offers a fresh perspective that centers the experience of Middle Eastern Christians, but it also presents a careful appraisal of the plurality of intra- and inter-communal expressions and encounters that continue to shape the reality of Middle Eastern Christians to this day.

As the title indicates, the author’s critique of the politics of the Christian persecution discourse is the overarching theme of the study. Rather than settling for the facile and lamentably commonplace ahistorical narratives of the persecution a beleaguered Christian minority at the hands of an undifferentiated Muslim majority, Raheb traces the roots of the current predicament to the late Ottoman setting and the Western colonial enterprise. While the persecution of Middle Eastern Christians has been a recurring theme in Western discourse since the mid-nineteenth century until the present day (p. 148), Raheb contends that it is “a Western construct that says more about the West than about the Christians of the Middle East” (p. 143). Indeed, “intra-European national rivalries and competition in religious mission,” the author adduces, “planted the seeds for sectarian identities that were not previously known in such a form or intensity” (p. 31). The ensuing “culture of sectarianism” fragmented the very social fabric of the Middle East (p. 32), thereby serving as the hotbed for the successive catastrophic events that beset Middle Eastern Christians such as the massacre on Mount Lebanon (Chapter 3), the Assyrian and Armenian Genocide (Chapter 6), and the predicament of Palestinian Christians (Chapter 8). “Over and over again,” Raheb concludes,

Middle Eastern Christians were sacrificed at the altar of Western national interests. This was the case with Britain and the Assyrians in Iraq; with Germany in the Armenian Genocide; with Britain in Palestine; and with the United States in Iraq and Syria. In most cases, the West was part of the problem for Middle Eastern Christianity and not part of the solution. (p. 150)

As Raheb demonstrates throughout his investigation, the persecution discourse not only lacks the tools to scrutinize the roots of the problem—the very subject it sets out to elucidate—but it persistently effaces the Western complicity in the contemporary Christian predicament as well.

Intertwined with his exposition of the theoretical incongruity and factual selectivity of the persecution discourse, Raheb relates the story of Middle Eastern Christians as one not of persecution, but “of struggle, resistance, social involvement, and resilience” (p. 156). This is reliably palpable throughout the different chapters, where Raheb invokes different Middle Eastern Christian voices to accompany the reader on their journey of exploring the vibrancy, richness, and pluralistic expressions of Middle Eastern Christianity. Raheb’s presentation of

Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883), the leading Arab Christian intellectual (and the first prominent Middle Eastern Christian voice encountered in the study), is a case in point. Hailing from present-day Lebanon, Bustani was an ardent proponent of the Arab Renaissance and played a key role in translating the Bible into Arabic (p. 23; the very translation that many Arabic-speaking Christians still use to this day). In response to the massacre of Christians on Mount Lebanon, Bustani founded *al-Madrasa al-Wataniya* (the National School) “where in an ecumenical spirit, Christians, Druze, and Muslims could study together”—an experiment that, as Raheb notes, “must be understood as a critique of the many missionary schools that Bustani came to know and sometimes teach in” (p. 45). For Bustani, the focus on Arab identity, therefore, serves “as an antidote to confessional fanaticism, and thus to sectarianism” (p. 44): the very sectarianism that fueled the massacre. In many ways, Raheb’s invocations of Bustani and the different Arab Christian figures interwoven throughout the study converge on their shared vision of peaceful and harmonious living with their compatriots, regardless of their creed. From Bustani (Chapters 2 and 3) to the Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World (Chapter 12), Raheb features Middle Eastern Christian voices as they envision a just and equitable society with their compatriots. The stark contrast between such examples on the one hand, and the colonial interests and narratives that continue to fuel sectarianism on the other, can hardly be missed.

By centering Middle Eastern Christian voices, Raheb accomplishes more than merely presenting a genealogy of the sectarian ills besetting Middle Eastern society: he offers a much-needed decolonial reframing and reenvisioning of interfaith relations in the region. As the author establishes throughout his investigation, the story of Middle Eastern Christians is the story of the Middle East. *The Politics of Persecution* is thus essential not only for students of Middle Eastern Christianity or Christian-Muslim relations, but also for those interested in the study of the Middle East. A timely scholarly feat, Raheb’s study is particularly instructive for students and practitioners of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in the region and beyond.

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