

Book Review

***Shi'ite Rulers, Sunni Rivals, and Christians in Between: Muslim-Christian Relations in Fāṭimid Palestine and Egypt.* By Steven Gertz. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2023. vii+183. ISBN: 978-1-4632-4473-6. \$57 (paperback).**



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Studies on the legal status of Christian communities under Islamic rule is a well-trodden path. Ever since Antoine Fattal's 1958 classic *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beyrouth/Beirut, Lebanon: Impr. Catholique, 1958), many Western scholars have examined textual sources to better understand the role and place of *dhimmis* in an Islamic empire and within a Medieval Islamic society. More recently, this line of inquiry has continued with monographs by scholars like Milka Levy-Rubin and David Friedenreich. As has been argued by Friedenreich and now Steven Gertz, the development of legal rulings about *dhimmis* are not only about the religious minorities, but also about the "religious identity formation" of the Muslim ruling class and their attempt to define themselves over and against other communities (2). In this work, Gertz engages in an original method by examining different types of Christian and Muslim literature to distill out a development of the religious identity formation of the Isma'ili Fatimids, the Shi'a community who ruled over and among a predominantly Sunni majority in Egypt and Syria from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Gertz scrutinizes several Christian and Muslim sources of diverse perspectives, including Shi'ite and Sunni *fiqh* literature and *tawārīkh* (that is, historical narratives), to evaluate the status of Christians living in between the sectarian struggles of Sunnis and Shi'ites during Fatimid rule.

Gertz analyzes the *Nahj al-Balāgha*, a compilation of the sermons and speeches attributed to 'Alī ibn al-Ṭālib, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 661), and the primary spiritual leader for the Shi'ite community. Gertz focuses on the role that *dhimmis* play in this compilation. He then explores the Isma'ili scholarship of al-Qādī al-Nu'mān (d. 974) in his *Da'ā'im al-Islām*, a legal work that focuses specifically on how Shi'ites should "relate to the umma and how Muslims should treat non-Muslims" (45). This type of academic analysis of legal manuals to determine past relations goes back to 19th-century Orientalist discourse. However, as Gertz and others have noted, what *fiqh* scholars may have deemed orthodox Shi'ite or Sunni Islam certainly does not necessitate that this is what Muslim rulers or even Muslim believers themselves did at any given time. The legal manuals were the production of religious elites (5). Thus, Gertz follows up the examination of these Shi'ite texts with the well-known Sunni Egyptian history of al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), followed by a survey of the Christian Melkite historian Yaḥya ibn Sa'īd al-Anṭākī of the 11th century and a 19th-century Melkite manuscript from St. Catherine's monastery (Sinai Arabic 692). Gertz's intention is to distill out the status of Christians under the Fatimids by comparing

legal texts with Christian and Muslim histories as the Fatimids developed their own social religious identity. By using this combination of sources, Gertz attempts to get his bearings on how the rise of the Fatimid Shi'ite rule amid a sea of Sunni Islam, or "a multi-confessional environment" (46), affected the Christian community of the Near East.

Chapter one of this book provides an overview of his method and an introduction to his choice of sources (described above), including the previous scholarly research on the "Pact of 'Umar." The Pact was a primary apocryphal source to which Muslim rulers appealed as a guide toward the ordering of a multi-confessional society. Chapters Two and Three follow with a survey of references to the *dhimmis* in the *fiqh* literature of 'Alī and al-Nu'mān noted above. Chapters Four and Five follow with an examination of the treatment of Christians by Fatimid rulers in the histories of al-Maqrīzī and the Christian records of al-Anṭākī and the St. Catherine manuscript. A short conclusion draws the research to a close.

Gertz argues that, contrary to previous commonly held views that Christians fared better under a minority-Muslim Fatimid community (apart from such crisis moments by al-Hakim), they "did not, on balance, benefit from the Sunni-Shi'a conflict but rather suffered because of it" (151). Overall, Christians—defined legally as *dhimmis*—"became a target for retribution if they were perceived not to be doing their part to counter the power of the 'Abbasids" (154). However, to address his initial interest regarding Fatimid religious identity formation, Gertz concludes that three overlapping factors affected this identity formation in a multi-confessional environment. First and foremost, "pragmatic power" was employed to realize the goals of those Fatimids in authority. It could also be argued that such a conclusion cuts across all cultural or religious communities and is endemic to human societies in general. Second, Gertz states the *tradition* (here Shi'ite sources) worked along with state power to support Fatimid policies regulating the public role of *dhimmis*, particularly related to interactions in food markets and civic or religious festivals. In this case, it was the restrictive *fiqh* rulings ascertained through the tradition of 'Alī and the Shi'ite Imams. Finally, "there is another, more unpredictable element in religious identity formation: that of *friendship*" (155). Gertz uses several examples of well-to-do Christians or Jews who had friendly access to the Caliphs and were able to influence state policy to benefit the status of Christians within society at large.

These three features that shaped religious identity formation, according to Gertz, viz., power, tradition, and friendship, are certainly not novel explanations to the status, role, and experience of Christians living in a dominant Islamic empire. The fact that the state can use tradition to both support its rule and challenge other rulings is not surprising. Further, one might question how Gertz came to select these sources to compare and distill out the past status of Christians. Nevertheless, Gertz has provided a plausible argument that—contrary to previous assumptions that Fatimid rule benefited Christians due to Fatimid sensitivities of being a religious minority themselves—Christians were negatively affected by Fatimid rule. In the face of a Sunni-majority society, the Fatimid rulers justified themselves by demonstrating that non-Muslims had a particular place in society, below that of Muslims. Gertz's focus on friendship as an under-appreciated factor in the role of interreligious relations is important because it humanizes the historical record. Yet, it also underlines that Medieval society was always subject to the whim or interpretation of whatever ruler had power. Nonetheless, Gertz's work provides us one more resource to consider how Christians and Muslims of various identities related to each other

publicly during one period of Islamic history. It is a worthy contribution to the studies of medieval Christian-Muslim relations.

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