

**COLONIALISM AND CHRISTIANITY
IN THE MANDATE PERIOD**

**Colonialism and Christianity in
Mandate Palestine**, by Lara Robson.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.
vii + 278 pages. Bibliography to p. 298.
Index to p. 310. \$55.00 cloth.

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The period of the British Mandate rule
in Palestine is of great significance for
the modern history of Christianity in

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Jerusalem and the Holy Land, because it represents an important transition point between the end of four centuries of Ottoman rule and the formation of the modern states of Israel and Jordan. It is surprising, however, that while the importance of the Mandate for the Christian churches is often noted, it has to date been an understudied area. Hence Laura Robson's book *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* is especially welcome.

The book originated as Robson's doctoral dissertation and is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter chronicles the emergence of a Palestinian Christian elite from the late Ottoman period to the British Mandate. The late Ottoman period, from approximately the mid-nineteenth century onward, has often been noted by scholars as a key period in which the modern political administration of the Sanjak of Jerusalem took place. It was a significant period of growth in Christian presence in the Holy Land, which mirrored the late nineteenth century revival in the Christian world that took place in Europe and North America, and also in Russia and Ethiopia. This revival saw a growing interest in the region, but it also established a significant presence through the creation of monasteries, churches, and pilgrimages. The Palestinian Christian elites benefited from these two historical processes, Ottoman and Christian.

The second chapter looks at how the British Mandate reinvented the Ottoman millet system by developing communal structures juxtaposed with the solidifying of political and religious identity. This chapter is important because it allows us to understand not only how British policy worked in Palestine but also how it related to wider imperial practice. Chapter 3 looks at the Arab Orthodox Christian community in its relations with the emerging Palestinian national movement in the context of church-state relations under the Mandate and the intense and at times extremely fractious relationship with the Orthodox patriarchate of Jerusalem, which was often defined by its Hellenic or Greek identity. Robson here engages well with existing scholarship, such as the work of Daphne

Tsimhoni. I wonder, however, if the author might have attempted to understand Orthodox ecclesial politics within a wider context—that of the breakup of the so-called Orthodox commonwealth with the ending of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of new nation states, in particular in southeast Europe. The symmetry between the Orthodox movement in the Orthodox patriarchate of Antioch and the Bulgarian exarchate movement in the late nineteenth century have been noted by other scholars, such as Derek Hopwood (1969). It might have been interesting if Robson had looked at the Orthodox movement in Palestine and Jordan in comparison with the emergence of the Albanian Orthodox Church, which acquired independent status in the interwar years but also had to engage with the dual identity of both Greek religious identity and Albanian national and cultural affiliation.

The fourth chapter is important in that it sets out to give an authoritative account of the emergence of a stream of Christian communalism that was often associated with a distinctive religious and political preoccupation and instinct. The dilemma of a distinct Christian contribution to Palestinian Arab nationalism by Christian political figures and thinkers always had to engage with the issue of the political orientation of Islam. The author sets out nicely here a debate with such scholars as Elie Kedourie on the relationship between religion and nationalist identities. The fifth chapter is a distinct contribution to understanding the position of Palestinian Arab Episcopalians under the Mandate, who shared a common Christian denominationalism with the Church of England and the Anglican world of the wider imperial realm. This is of great interest, but again, it might have been helpful if we were allowed some insights into how the different streams of Anglican religious culture understood the religious and political situation of the Holy Land, relations with Eastern Christianity, and the status of Jerusalem and the Holy Places.

I would suggest that one issue, which while not totally absent from the volume could have been further explored, is the position of the Latin and Melkite Catholic communities, one of

the most important Christian communities in Palestine under the Mandate. For an account of this issue, one has to turn to the work of the Italian scholars Paolo Pieraccini on the Latin Catholic Patriarchate, and Paolo Maggiolini's (2011) work, *Arabi cristiani di Transgiordania. Spazi politici e cultura tribale (1841–1922)* (*Christian Arabs of Transjordan: Political Space and Tribal Culture*, Franco Angeli, 2011). This notwithstanding, Robson's book serves as a distinct contribution to our knowledge of the position of Palestinian Arab Christians in relation to British rule in Palestine, in which nationalism and religious identity formed itself into a distinct political profile in the context of late European colonialism in the Middle East.