Book Review

Thomas A. Carlson, *Christianity in Fifteenth-Century Iraq*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xx + 322 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-18627-9. Price: $99.00 (cloth)/$80.00 (e-book).

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For this groundbreaking study Thomas A. Carlson directed his attention to one of the major, if still often overlooked, Christian communities of the Middle East, the Church of the East.[1] Furthermore, he chose to work on one of the most obscure periods of the church's history, that of the tumultuous, politically fragmented, and poorly documented ninth AH/fifteenth CE century. Carlson's labors have resulted in a work that contributes significantly to the historiography of both late medieval Christianity in the Middle East and the murky period marked by post-Timurid Türkmen domination while making a plea for more works in a similar vein. Of recent works that take non-Muslims in the Islamicate world as their primary subjects,[2] Carlson's has arguably faced the most challenging path to realization, given the limitations of his source base and the historiographical obscurity of the period. Despite such issues and a few shortcomings in execution,

1. Perhaps more than with any other Middle Eastern Christian community during the medieval period, naming conventions for the Church of the East are decidedly confusing. For centuries the Church of the East was known to most outsiders as the Nestorian Church, an appellative usually rejected by members of the ecclesial community itself. Meanwhile, scholars have often employed the moniker "East Syriac" to distinguish it from the Western Miaphysite Syriac tradition (the Church of the East being Diaphysite, confessing two distinct natures to Christ). In more recent years, "Assyrian" and "Chaldean" have emerged as signifiers of aspirational national identities attached to East Syriac communities, names that have also been used for the proliferation of separate churches coming out of the medieval Church of the East thanks to new connections with the Catholic Church and Protestant bodies. On the issue of terminology, see Sebastian P. Brock, "Nestorian Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 78 (1996): 23–53.

2. Such as Jack Boulos Victor Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), or Antony Eastmond, *Tamta's World: The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), on which see Z. Pogossian's review essay in this issue.

the study is a fine piece of historical scholarship and will hopefully lead to more rethinkings of the late medieval and early modern history of the Middle East that take religious and other forms of diversity more seriously. In the following review I consider in more depth Carlson's subjects, source base, arguments, and overall contributions chapter by chapter, concluding with some critical observations and further suggestions both to supplement Carlson's approaches and to extend his findings in additional directions.

Few religious communities of the Islamic Later Middle Period (roughly, 656–960/1258–1550) are as little known and poorly integrated into historical scholarship as the Church of the East. Whereas the East Syriac tradition from Late Antiquity up to the rule of the Mongols is relatively well known, the period that stretches from the waning of the Ilkhanids to the dominance of the Ottomans and Safavids is much less well represented in the historiography.[3] The situation changes in examinations of the much more recent past, during which East Syriac Christians came under the gaze of Western European missionaries, travelers, diplomats, and others, even as the overall situation of the Church of the East became increasingly precarious and tragic.

Much of the obscurity of the post-Mongol Church of the East's history is due to the region-wide troubles of the post-Ilkhanid age. The conquests of Timur soon gave way to political fragmentation and continual competition, marked by the oscillating dominance of two Türkmen dynasties, the Āqqūyunlū and the Qarāqūyunlū, with other regional and local powers and strongmen carving out their own spaces as well. As Carlson notes, Timurid rule over this region was at most nominal, if that, while the adjacent Mamluks and the Ottomans generally exerted little to no control over these competing dynasties. On the whole the ninth/fifteenth century was markedly tumultuous and violent, no empire or world-conqueror giving shape or order to the clash of polities and violent political entrepreneurs. Literary, artistic, and architectural production continued among the various religious and cultural communities of the region, but it did so in a diminished state, which, along with the sheer political fluidity and confusion of the period, has tended to discourage sustained historical analysis. Carlson's helpful overview of the overarching political history of the region in chapter 1 is therefore in itself a welcome intervention even apart from the rest of the book.[4]

3. Among the significant recent works dealing with the Church of the East during the earlier period are Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2013); and Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

4. Consider that before this book, the only full-length study of the Āqqūyunlū in English was Woods's book, which is by now quite old, even in its updated edition, while perhaps the most extensive discussion of the Qarāqūynulū in a Western language is a series of articles by Minorsky from well over half a century ago! John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire*, rev. and expanded ed. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999). For Minorsky's own listing of his varied contributions over the years, see V. Minorsky,

Carlson lays out the challenges in terms of the available sources early in the book. Muslim sources are of limited help in reconstructing Christian affairs given the general lack of interest *ʿulamāʾ* authors took in their non-Muslim neighbors. That said, Carlson draws on Islamic sources in both Arabic and Persian insofar as they aid in establishing the wider political and social context as well as for their occasional bursts of interest. Although the Church of the East is his main focus, Carlson also draws on sources produced by both the Miaphysite Syriac and the Armenian Orthodox. As for the Church of the East itself, Carlson's source base is relatively small and consists mostly of sources rarely utilized by historians: liturgical and theological didactic poetry, books of ritual, and around three dozen colophons to various manuscripts—an especially important source for Carlson given that no Church of the East chronicle literature was produced during this period.

The book is divided into three sections. The first third deals with the wider political and cultural context of the Church of the East in the ninth/fifteenth century, addressing both its relations with its Muslim neighbors and its own internal social structure and position vis-à-vis other Christians. Chapter 1 sets up the complex political situation as well as the internal conditions of the Church of the East, which were marked by the dominance of clergy, with the highest "secular" leaders being village chiefs (*rēshānē*). Chapter 2 examines the interplay between Muslim rulers and their diverse Christian subjects. Carlson demonstrates that the rulers of the period did not follow a single consistent approach toward their *dhimmī* subjects. Rather, they alternated between stances that ranged from outright patronage of Christians to outright persecution, neither precisely conforming to the theoretical constructions of the *ʿulamāʾ* nor entirely ignoring them. Chaper 3 continues on a similar tack, working to uncover the relations between members of the Church of the East and their Muslim and Miaphysite Christian neighbors. Carlson argues that although violence was endemic through much of this period, it rarely seems to have been of a determinedly "confessional" nature. Instead, an uneasy coexistence tended to prevail, with occasional points of sustained contact and even cultural sharing in evidence (such as hereditary practices of religious hierarchical succession). A similarly fraught but mostly nonconfrontational coexistence seems to have been the norm among the various Christian communities as well. This chapter might have also benefited from consideration of another recent work on (among other things) relations among Christian and Muslim groups, Tijana Krstić's *Contested Conversions*; in particular, her discussion of the "neo-martyrdom" genre might have helped illuminate why such accounts appear in the Armenian context but not in the Syriac one during this period.[5]

"Jihān-Shāh Qara-Qoyunlu and His Poetry (Turkmenica 9)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16, no. 2 (1954): 271-272.

5. Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). See also the discussion of Coptic neo-martyrdom in Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Chapter 4 is an "interlude" transitioning to a more focused discussion of the Church of the East's internal affairs. Carlson opens this section with a discussion of theoretical approaches to defining "community" in the premodern world, and the subsequent chapters examine how the Church of the East constituted itself as a distinctive community in a religiously plural world. He notes that on the whole the church's theology, ritual, and communal life were not massively different from previous periods or even from those of other Christians in the region. The "payoff" of his findings, he argues, "is not a story about theological change, but an account of how these people understood their social group, in theological terms" (p. 115). Some of his findings do point to slight modifications from previous centuries: there was little emphasis in this period, he contends, on the unique Diaphysite Christology of the Church of the East, and the greater perceived threat was not losses to Miaphysite churches but apostasy to Islam. Where chapters 5 and 6 deal primarily with doctrinal and theological constructions, chapter 7 takes the reader through the ritual life of the church. Carlson is especially interested in how different people, lay and clergy, men and women, participated in these rituals and constituted themselves as belonging to the wider community. Although Carlson's discussion of "community concept" in chapter 4 is theoretically informed, the chapter on ritual and belonging could have benefited from engagement with the burgeoning field of ritual studies, which might have allowed Carlson to draw out additional conclusions from a challenging and primarily prescriptive source base.[6]

Finally, chapters 8 and 9 return to issues of change and adjustment within the fraught circumstances of the ninth/fifteenth century. Chapter 8 examines the failed attempt of the Church of the East to resist hereditary succession to the patriarchal throne as well as other measures to reinforce clerical authority. Chapter 9 deals with the church's sense of time and of its place in sacred history. Here Carlson describes the unsurprising centrality of salvation history, while somewhat more surprisingly noting that although the Church of the East placed much emphasis on devotion to saints during this period, it neither produced new saints nor venerated any from after the rise of Islam. The work ends with a recapitulation and a plea for future historiography to better attend to the "polyphony" of the Middle East in all its complexity and texture.

On the whole this is a well-crafted and historiographically overdue study. It demonstrates that even for such troublesome periods it is possible both to recover non-Muslim voices and histories and to make them a part of the larger historical narrative. Carlson is to be commended for his interpretive ingenuity and his ability to move back and forth across linguistic divides as well as all the other divides and disparate bodies of literature, secondary and primary, that map onto them. It might be argued that the middle third of the book restates matters

6. For relatively recent overviews of the field from two different persepectives, see Catherine M. Bell and Reza Aslan, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

rather obvious to anyone with a passing acquaintance with any form of Orthodox Christianity, but Carlson's object here is in fact praiseworthy, in that his stated goal is to recover how members of the Church of the East saw themselves in relation to God, the wider world, and one another in the theological terms and ritual work that were continually present to them.

Although Carlson's chronological framing is largely effective, it might have been helpful to include discussion of slightly later periods and their literary production, such as the early modern vernacular Syriac didactic poetry (*durekṭā*) studied by Alessandro Mengozzi.[7] As Carlson notes, there is little sense of doctrinal development or change in the sources he is considering, and indeed it would be hard to detect significant change given the limitations of that source base. Extending the chronological frame at points, if only for comparative purposes, might have helped surmount this issue while retaining the focus on the ninth/fifteenth century and the relative stability of doctrine and practice inherited from earlier periods.

In a similar vein, it is not so much a criticism of Carlson's findings as a caution to point out that a number of his conclusions rest upon one or two works by a single author, which, Carlson implicitly argues, ought to be taken as representative of the wider East Syriac community. Carlson is, of course, not to be faulted for low rates of textual production or survival. But the small available source base could call into question some of his findings, such as the otherwise fascinating suggestion, discussed further below, that the production of "new saints" seems to have been suspended in the Church of the East during this period. Might it simply be, for instance, that more recent saints' cults (in this case, any postdating the rise of Islam) took place in social milieus and literary contexts other than those represented in the surviving literature?

Throughout his study Carlson rightly emphasizes the diversity of this region, in general and particularly in the ninth/fifteenth century. By "diversity" he means primarily the diversity of non-Muslim groups. The book (and any future research along similar lines) could have benefited, however, from a more robust sense of the considerable internal diversity that marked expressions of Islam in the ninth/fifteenth century across Afro-Eurasia but especially in the region with which Carlson deals. This intra-Muslim diversity was hardly confined to, or even well expressed by, the conventional bifurcation of Sunni and Shiʿi. The ninth/fifteenth century saw widespread experimentation in religious life, from the relatively "mainstream" elaboration of saints' cults and centers of power[8] to the effloresence of Ḥurūfī thought and action

7. Alessandro Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe: A Story in a Truthful Language; Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac (North Iraq, 17th Century)* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); idem, "Neo-Syriac Literature in Context: A Reading of the Durektha On Revealed Truth by Joseph of Telkepe (17th Century)," in *Redefining Christian Identity: Christian Cultural Strategies Since the Rise of Islam*, ed. J. J. van Ginkel, H. L. Murre-van den Berg, and Theo Maarten van Lint (Leuven: Peeters and Departement Oosterse Studies, 2005); idem and Emanuela Braida, *Religious Poetry in Vernacular Syriac from Northern Iraq (17th–20th Centuries): An Anthology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011).

8. For instance, the ultimately very successful cultus of Shāh Niʿmat Allāh Valī (d. ca. 835/1431), for which

and to the transformation of the Ṣafavī *ṭarīqa*.[9] Often condensed into a narrative of "heterodoxy" or "Shiʿism," this epoch of religious experimentation resists neat categorization, yet is significant both for its effect in the ninth/fifteenth century and as a key component in the formation of the empire-dominated early modern world of the tenth/sixteenth.[10]

A greater awareness of this diversity within ninth/fifteenth century Islam itself (such that even referring to a unitary, if only notional, "Islam" becomes rather problematic if probably unavoidable) could provide insight into additional points of contact and cultural sharing akin to the shared concepts and practices of hierarchical inheritance discussed in chapter 3. For instance, Carlson briefly mentions an Armenian *vardapet* and eventual bishop Mkrtič Nałaš, who is described in a decidedly hagiographic colophon from 853/1449 as, among other things, being venerated by Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds, even by the local Muslim ruler Shāh Qarā Yoluq ʿUthmān. The treatment that the author of the colophon says was bestowed by the ruler and other Muslims upon Mkrtič is highly redolent of how a saintly Sufi shaykh would be treated: gifted with various votives and sought out for *baraka*-bestowing activities such as bodily veneration, recitation, and clothing exchanges.[11] Such a description, as well as those of other, similar figures to whom Carlson alludes (p. 75), suggests at the very least a cross-confessional commensurability in understandings of what constituted a holy person.

The presence of widespread Islamic "religious experimentation," in which confessional boundaries were often rendered more permeable (or at least perceived by others resistant to such experimentation as such), might also help explain why, for instance, a figure such as the Qarāqūyunlū ruler of Baghdad Shāh Muḥammad b. Qarā Yūsuf (r. 814–36/1411–33) was reported by some to have become a secret Christian. He was said to have queried the *ʿulamāʾ*, "'Who is better: the living or the dead?' and when they gave preference to the living, he wound up saying: 'and Jesus is alive, and Muḥammad is dead.'"[12] Might such admittedly hostile reports reflect genuine religious experimentation or attempts at articulating a new sacral identity on the part of Türkmen rulers? One need only look at the poetry of the first Safavid shāh, Ismāʿīl, who emerged out of this broader milieu, to see decided parallels (the poetry of the Qarāqūyunlū Jihān Shāh, as Minorsky noted many years ago, bears some resemblance to Ismāʿīl's theophanic

see Jean Aubin et al., *Matériaux pour la biographie de Shâh Ni'matullah Walí Kermânî: Textes persans publiés avec une introduction* (Tehran: Département d'iranologie de l'Institut franco-iranien, 1956).

9. See, for instance, Shahzad Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), esp. 85–108.

10. The claims to saintly, messianic, even apocalyptic significance and standing on the part of or on behalf of Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal rulers (to limit ourselves to the most prominent examples) that mark the tenth/sixteenth century have their roots in the religious ferment and productivity of the ninth/fifteenth.

11. Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301–1480: A Source for Middle Eastern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 209–214, esp. 210–211.

12. Minorsky, "Jihān-Shāh Qara-Qoyunlu," 274.

verse).[13] That the clergy and ritual of the Church of the East may not have played an active or deliberate role in such theological maneuvers and sacral self-stylings, may have served does not preclude the church having been a resource and a reference point for rulers, shaykhs, and others intent on their own elaborations of Islam.

Finally, an expanded sense of Islamic diversity might help to further explicate one of Carlson's more striking discoveries, concerning the East Syriac sense of time and practices of saint veneration. As noted above, the panoply of saints venerated by the late medieval Church of the East consisted of figures from the late antique past who were nonetheless perceived as close and living by their devotees and supplicants. The sense of an almost mythic communal past, in which saints of ten centuries earlier loom up as if they were contemporaries, was not entirely unique to the church. A similar rendering of time and sanctity can be found among neighboring groups such as the Yazīdīs, the Ahl-i Ḥaqq, and the Kākāʾī, religious communities that are perhaps best described as "Islam-adjacent" and that probably took their decisive shapes during the period in question. For our purposes, it is notable that although these communities venerate a range of saintly, even divine, figures, the latter have usually been framed in highly fluid chronological terms, with relatively little discernable "new" saintly production in relation to the foundational holy figures.[14] For all of these communities, localized hierarchies perpetuate the memory of this distant yet immanent sacralized past, with new elaborations tending to take the form of liturgical poetry, often set to song and incorporated into the collective ritual life of the community.

Herein lies another possible parallel and even point of contact with the Church of the East during this period—a church also perpetuated in no small part by localized religious hierarchies carrying out rituals and producing poetic liturgical material. Like their "heterodox" neighbors, the Church of the East was a minority community, predominantly rural, and usually pressed for resources and political clout. Such shared circumstances might help explain similar dynamics, even as other Christian communities and some "heterodox" Muslim groups, such as the early Safavids, went in ultimately quite different directions. The Armenian Orthodox Church, for instance, continued to produce a wide range of literature and artistic material while also generating "new" saints, particularly in the form of the so-called neo-martyrs, into the early modern period and beyond. Even as (albeit in this period relatively rare) martyrdom marked the Armenians off from their Muslim neighbors, traces of the shared Islamicate milieu are visible everywhere in the ninth/fifteenth century and beyond in Armenian culture, from the new

13. V. Minorsky, "Jihān-Shāh," 276–283 and passim; for Ismāʿīl's verse, see V. Minorsky, "The Poetry of Shāh Ismāʿīl I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10, no. 4 (1942): 1006a–1053a.

14. See, for instance, the prose narratives given in the Persian Ahl-i Ḥaqq text edited by Wladimir Ivanow, *The Truth-Worshippers of Kurdistan: Ahl-i Haqq Texts Edited in the Original Persian and Analysed by W. Ivanow* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953). Although evidence of refashioning appears (tobacco is mentioned, as are Ottoman officials), the stories of the Ahl-i Ḥaqq holy "pantheon" are set in a largely undifferentiated and undated past, a rendering that makes them feel very immediate to the participant in the present.

and vibrant styles visible in Armenian manuscript illumination to common naming practices, displaying different sorts of dynamism and engagement with Islamicate culture.[15] At issue here are differing strategies, possibilities, and ensuing dynamics. Whereas the Church of the East could only occasionally boast the patronage of Muslim rulers, otherwise depending on support from its largely rural peasant and mostly nonelite members, an elite of Armenians survived into the Ottoman and Safavid periods, supporting churches and monasteries as best they could. Such elites, who also embodied "Islamicate" cultural forms by choice and necessity, could serve as conduits for the traces of the Islamicate within Armenian "religious" works as well.

In conclusion, as both Carlson's study and my remarks above suggest, much work remains to be done in understanding the social, religious, cultural, and indeed political parameters of this period in relation to both Muslims (with a stress on the plural) and non-Muslims in all their diversity. As Carlson argues, the one ought not to exist in our reconstructions of the period without the other. Groups such as the ninth/fifteenth-century Church of the East have a recoverable history, and that history was and should be seen as part of the story of their more powerful and historiographically central Muslim rulers and neighbors—not just as a casual appendage to be mentioned as a manifestation of clichéd Middle Eastern diversity but as a central and indeed irreplaceable aspect of the larger story.

15. For a fine distillation of these trends in brief, see, for instance, the magnificent miniature of the enthroned Theotokos and Christ Child in an Armenian Gospel book completed in 1455 at the monastery of Gamałiēl in Xizan by the scribe Yohannēs Vardapet, illuminated by the priest Xačʿatur: Walters W.543, fol. 14v (http://www.thedigitalwalters.org/Data/WaltersManuscripts/html/W543/). Here as in much other fifteenth-century Armenian artistic production, the artistic style is highly evocative of contemporary production, particularly in Baghdad; fol. 14v shows and labels the priest, Pʿilipos who commissioned the manuscript, as well as his brothers Yusēpʿ and Sultanša, both bearing names drawn from the surrounding Islamicate milieu.