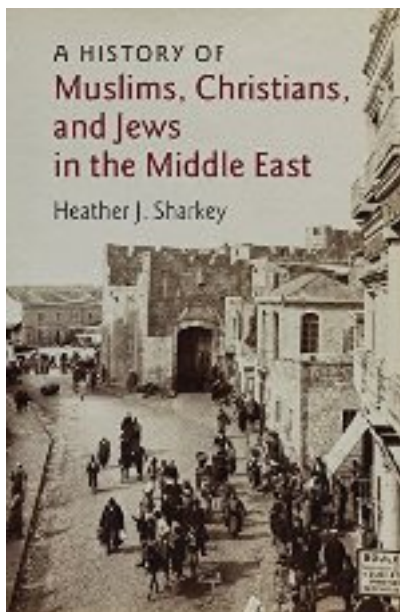


# A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East'

31/12/2018 | Jessica Marglin

**Heather Sharkey: *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2017. 394 pp. \$31.99.**



Heather Sharkey's detailed and meticulous *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* culls the best from recent scholarship to offer a welcome and significantly updated narrative of inter-religious relations in Middle Eastern history. Her focus is on the Ottoman Empire, especially from the eighteenth century until the onset of WWI. Sharkey frames her study as the history of a region that was once full of religious diversity; various sects of Christians, not to mention Jews, "inhabited shared worlds" alongside Muslims (p. 1). Her opening two pages catalogue the dwindling and, in some cases, disappearance of non-Muslim communities from the Middle East. With this book, she aims to present a history of the kind of everyday relations among Muslims, Christians, and Jews that no longer characterizes what has largely become a mono-religious region.

Accordingly, Sharkey emphasizes a history of the "mundane," by which she means in part the history of quotidian coexistence that was not necessarily violent. Sharkey sets her narrative against the sensationalism that so often characterizes American media coverage of inter-religious relations in the Middle East; instead, she seeks to describe how communities spent "decades in a state of proximity characterized by relative quiet" (p. 8). Mundane, to Sharkey, also implies a kind of social, even anthropological history of everyday life drawing on nonstate sources such as "memoirs, cookbooks, novels, anthologies, ethnographies, films, and musical recordings" (p. 9). As part of her focus on the quotidian, Sharkey sprinkles her synthesis with compelling details about material or personal histories. For instance, she discusses the introduction of tomatoes into Ottoman cuisine as a way to rethink "how much of what people assume as traditional now is the product of accumulated (or still accumulating) change from the past" (p. 103). She illustrates the history of Ottomans' migration to the Americas with an anecdote about Rose Cohen Misrie. This Jew from

Syria was born in Libya and moved to New York in 1906, where she “opened ‘The Egyptian Rose,’ a kosher and self-styled ‘Syrian’ restaurant ... [serving] canonical Levantine dishes ... to a mostly male clientele of ‘Syrian, Turkish, and Greek Jews’” (p. 197).

But Sharkey’s more important methodological choice is to firmly and relentlessly ground her narrative about inter-religious relations in a broader history of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews* is best described as a synthetic history of the late Ottoman Empire with an emphasis on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. There are distinct advantages to Sharkey’s method of embedding her analysis of intercommunal encounters into a more general history of the region. Needless to say, Christians and Jews did not encounter their Muslim neighbors in a vacuum; understanding their history requires a solid grounding in modern Ottoman history more broadly. This approach does, however, mean that Sharkey’s book is packed full of information, which may make it too challenging for certain audiences (more on this below).

Sharkey wisely does not aim to evenly cover the entire history of the Islamic Middle East. Although the book begins with a chapter on the “Islamic foundations” of relations among the main three faiths, the remaining four chapters focus on the Ottoman Empire (and three of them are on the nineteenth century). As Sharkey explains, there is no one way to delimit the Middle East. Her choice to limit the book to Ottoman lands certainly makes sense for a modern history, given that the Ottomans ruled (more or less directly) the vast majority of the region we now call the Middle East for much of the early modern period and well into the nineteenth century. But Sharkey does not ignore places like Morocco and Iran, both of which remained outside the Ottoman orbit (and full histories of these places would undoubtedly make her book far too long).

Writing a history of non-Muslims under Islamic rule involves navigating a certain amount of polemics. Mark Cohen, a foremost authority on the Cairo Geniza, identified the historiography of Jews in the Islamic world as falling into two camps: the lachrymose or neo-lachrymose historians, who seek to demonstrate that Jews suffered in Islamic lands; and those who see the past with rose-tinted glasses, emphasizing Muslims’ tolerance and the inter-religious convivencia of the Islamic world.<sup>[1]</sup> Sharkey very consciously steers clear of either extreme: “This book shows that the sum of Islamic Middle Eastern history, as it applied to Muslims, Christians, and Jews, was neither a golden age nor a dark age, but rather more of a series of people-bumbled-along ages in the plural, interspersed with the very good and the pretty bad in different places and times. The history that happened was complicated” (p. 319). Indeed, “complicated” is the best way to sum up Sharkey’s assessment of inter-religious relations, especially in the nineteenth century. Her emphasis on complexity, however, should not be seen as a cop-out, but rather as a refusal to answer what is a fundamentally flawed question: Was it good for the Jews (or the Christians)? Sharkey wisely avoids responding either “yes” or “no.”

Sharkey emphasizes the extent to which developments in the Ottoman Empire—especially (but not only) concerning inter-religious relations—were increasingly bound up with events in Europe. For instance, the British delay in defending their Ottoman allies during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 emerged out of “Britain’s own history of ... Christian-Jewish relations” in that Benjamin Disraeli, then prime minister, and suffering from antisemitic attacks, was unable to muster sufficient support for the Ottomans (p. 84). The resulting influx of Muslim refugees into the Ottoman Empire was part of a larger pattern of Muslims fleeing violence or oppression in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century. These refugees—along with the lost territory in the Balkans—made the Ottoman Empire’s “population more Muslim and less Christian” (p. 185). Sharkey’s account suggests the extent to which European and Middle Eastern states alike became less diverse long before the forced migrations between the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey (1912-1920s) and the massive, sometimes forced departure of Jews from Islamic, and especially Arab, states following the creation of Israel in 1948.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this book is the sheer breadth of the secondary scholarship on which it draws. Sharkey has read, digested, and communicated a huge amount of work, much of it recent, spanning from early Islam to the twentieth century. In her acknowledgements, Sharkey explains that she wrote *A History of Muslims, Christians and Jews* “with my students at the University of Pennsylvania in mind” (p. xiii). There is little question that this book will be of great value to graduate students—especially given that few such detailed and updated synthetic accounts exist. Graduate students in modern Middle Eastern history will be able to use Sharkey’s book to get an overview of the subject before reading in more depth, and those outside the field will find it useful as an introduction (and can mine its excellent bibliography and extensive footnotes, should they want to read further on a given topic). As for undergraduates, the book is detailed and exhaustive enough that it seems most appropriate for advanced students who already have some background knowledge in the field. It is less clear whether the book would be accessible to undergraduates with no previous knowledge of Middle Eastern history.

Sharkey’s attention to Jews alongside other non-Muslim minorities, as well as “heterodox” Muslims such as the Dönme and the Alevis, is perhaps especially welcome for scholars of Jewish history. Sharkey deftly points out the convergences and divergences between the experience of Jews and other non-Muslims. She spends more time on Christians—who were, proportionally, a far larger percentage of the population. But scholars and students most interested in Jewish history will find plenty of discussion of specifically Jewish concerns. Indeed, one of the most important takeaways from this book is just how embedded Jews’ experience was in the broader developments affecting all subjects of the Ottoman Empire during the turbulent nineteenth century.

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