

Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine, by Laura Robson, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2011, x + 256 pp., US\$36.85 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-292-72653-6

Edward Said, Hanan Ashrawi, Benny Hinn; the world of academia, politics and religion is awash with the engaging impress of luminary Palestinian Christians, and their contribution is undeniable. Yet, disturbingly, knowledge of their history or more importantly their historiography is frequently hazy. In modern sociological discourse about Palestine and Israel, indigenous Arab Christians are often presented as an anomalous afterthought – a minor distraction from or adjunct to the dominant Muslim population. In her book, Laura Robson challenges these and other arcane assumptions, and casts the Palestinian Christians in a positive lead role during the 30-year period of British occupation and administration from 1918 to 1948. She extrapolates two main themes: first, the introduction and development of an entirely artificial – but rigidly defined – communal sectarianism as a deliberate administrative policy by the British colonial regime; second, the rapid marginalization and political ‘ghettoization’ of the Christian minority which, in 1917, was perhaps the most educated, articulate, prominent and influential group in the region.

The story of the native Christians of *Palestina Prima* under British rule is simultaneously, and perhaps ironically, both fairly straightforward and rather complicated. The book is divided into five delicately balanced chapters. The first, ‘Palestinian Christian elites from the late Ottoman era to the British Mandate’, outlines developments in the nineteenth century. The author emphasizes that the much publicized and on-going disputes over access, control and use of the holy sites of Christian Palestine were in reality an expression of the competition between France, Russia and other European states for power, prestige and influence within the Holy Land. These tensions usually had little to do with native Arab Christians and were often led by clergy who were either born or educated outside the region. After 1917, the British Mandate administration was extremely aware of – and also weary of – this point, and was at pains to avoid any involvement in the Christian population or their affairs. Ironically, the fear of becoming entangled in some sort of international diplomatic incident over what seemed endless ‘primitive theological and denominational disputes’ (p. 46) effectively precluded any British sympathy or help for the Arab laity in settling these very issues. The second chapter, ‘Reinventing the millet system: British imperial policy and the making of communal politics’, discusses British imperial policies, which were based on experiences in India. Thus laws that were introduced assumed that cultural differences were innate, and ethnic (or caste) differences were entirely immutable, unalterable and irreducible societal fissures. Robson says the British carefully cultivated and fostered a distinctly separate Muslim communal identity for two main reasons. First, there was an eye on Muslim communal self-expression across the Empire, especially India. Second, she believes there was, initially at least, an idea that the political aims of the Arab majority could be easily circumscribed into entirely harmless religious objectives – against the more clearly articulated Christian middle-class elite, who overtly wanted greater political autonomy for a multi-confessional Palestine.

Chapter 3, ‘The Arab Orthodox movement’, outlines the fascinating but seriously convoluted efforts to reform the Greek Orthodox Church, the largest Christian denomination inside Palestine, with important connections to the kingdom of Greece and to the Greek Orthodox Church across the eastern Mediterranean. In turn, the Greek Orthodox hierarchy vocally expressed support for the British regime and even sold land to the Zionist Palestine Land Development Company – a move that was vociferously condemned and contested by the Arab laity and their leadership. There had always been tension between the native Arabic speakers and the Greek clergy and monks who actually

controlled the churches. The Greek monastic orders 'understood their primary function to be the maintenance of the many Christian holy sites in Palestine, not the spiritual guidance of the Arab lay community' (p. 77). Overall, the British sympathized with the Arabs here but were totally baffled by 'the avalanche of pleas and claims from the patriarch, synod, brotherhood and laity' (p. 79) and left the Church and its resources untouched. The fourth chapter, 'Appropriating sectarianism: the brief emergence of pan-Christian communalism', outlines belated efforts in the 1930s by Palestinian Christians to utilize the British communal approach to their own advantage, but with mixed results. In Chapter 5, 'Palestinian Arab Episcopalians under Mandate', Robson reminds us that, curiously, the newest Christian community in Palestine – the Episcopalians (Anglican), 'converts to a British faith' (p. 128) – were in fact the worst off under British colonial governance. The penultimate section provides an excellent summary of Church Missionary Society activities in the nineteenth century and the development of the Palestine Native Church Council in 1905. The Council of the Episcopal Evangelical Church (*Majma' al-kanīsa al-injīliyya al-usqufiyya*) was distinctly Low Church, Evangelical, reformist and heavily involved in education and healthcare.

However, the British did not recognize any of the Protestant congregations, even the Anglicans, as either 'ancient' or 'historic' within their rubric of communal demarcations; and so the Arab Protestant minority were often subject to ecclesiastical courts dominated by other Christian groups such as the Orthodox and Catholics, both of which were undeniably 'ancient' and 'historic'. The book ends with a thoughtful and thought-provoking Epilogue, 'The consequences of sectarianism'. The author argues convincingly that the British introduced a sharp, inflexible communal sectarianism between Christians and Muslims that had not really been there in the Ottoman period. She insists it was based on a hazy romantic notion of the 'Biblical East' informed by academic Orientalism and confused Philhellenism that led directly to a clumsy application of their divide-and-rule policy derived from India, and which fundamentally remains the legacy in the region. Whilst there is nothing surprisingly new, overall the book is extremely well written and the main points succinctly constructed. Robson has provided an impressive foray into an under-researched field of the Mandate era, mounting a meticulous and persuasive argument in favour of a greater comprehension of the Christians of Palestine. This is an excellent monograph that will undoubtedly become the standard work on the subject for many years to come.