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### *Review of Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya*

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## Review of *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya*

### Comments

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Oxford University Press

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Eileen Ryan, *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2018. Pp. xiv, 244. Cloth \$45.00.

Recent years have seen an explosion in scholarship on Italy's empire. A simple search in WorldCat for the history of Italian colonialism in the last five years alone yields over a dozen peer-reviewed books, in fields as varied as history, political science, architecture, literature, and film and media studies. Italy took over parts of Somalia and Eritrea in the 1890s, Libya and the Dodecanese islands in 1911, and, led by Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Regime (in power from 1922 to 1945), Ethiopia in 1935. It lost all these territories by the end of World War II.

Eileen Ryan's study *Religion as Resistance* is a welcome addition to this fast-growing field. Ryan's book is a political and diplomatic history of Italy's imperial project in Libya, with a focus on the intersection of religion and empire. Ryan argues that Italy's pursuit of the colonies brought Church and state together: after decades of tensions between Catholic and lay leaders, originating in the Papacy's anger at having to cede temporal power to the new Kingdom of Italy in the nineteenth century, Italy's African empire became a common cause around which both Church and state could rally. The state adopted what Ryan calls "religious traditionalism" – the protection of religion from the evils of secularization and modernization – to woo Libyan Muslims, and in particular the Sanusiyya, a Sufi religious movement which functioned as a leading authority in Libya on the eve of and during Italian occupation. Italian colonial officials appealed to religion to mobilize Sanusi support for Italy's presence in Libya, stressing that both sides, colonizers and colonized, shared common ground in their concern for religious identity.

The book's chapters follow, roughly, the stages of Italy's relationship with the Sanusi leadership. Between 1904 and 1912, Italian colonizers harbored the hope that the Sanusi would greet them as liberators from Ottoman control. From 1912 to 1916, Sanusi-Ottoman alliances dashed these hopes, and from 1916 to 1923 Italy negotiated treaties with the Sanusiyya which resulted in a Sanusi emirate in the Cyrenaican interior. From 1923 to 1943, the Fascist government pursued an aggressive imperial expansion based on brutal violence and the internment of tens of thousands of Libyan civilians in concentration camps. Throughout these stages, the Church was a constant actor, mostly eager to support the state in its imperialist endeavors. The state, in turn, capitalized on religious traditionalism, but at times came into conflict with Catholic missions in Libya.

Ryan questions some existing assumptions in the study of Italian rule in Libya. While most historiography of modern Libya depicts the Sanusiyya as a political, even national organization, Ryan shows that the Sanusi did not see themselves as a national movement, indeed, that they did not even hold centralized control; in fact, they relied on tribal support, which waned and waxed depending on the period. Ryan also challenges the amnesia that characterizes Italian public opinion today regarding its imperial past. With thousands of Muslim refugees arriving to Italy (and on towards Europe) from North Africa, Italians like to think of a neat division between "us" and "them," in other words, between secular, liberal Italians (and by extension Europeans) and religious, traditional North Africans. In fact, this study of Italy's past – and the religious traditionalism both Church and state pursued in their enthusiasm for empire – reveals the opposite of such a division.

*Religion as Resistance* is the first book to provide a thorough survey of Italian-Sanusi relations, particularly in Cyrenaica, and the first to probe how religious and state authorities in Italy converged on matters of empire. Ryan has drawn on colonial archives, Italian newspapers, a handful of oral histories, and an impressive array of published sources, to produce a thoroughly-documented historical trajectory.

This book's weakness is that as a heavily political and diplomatic history, it engages in little discursive analysis. Sometimes opportunities to provide such analysis go ignored, as for instance in the case of the fascinating image of African submission to Italians, taken from a school book (p. 82). What assumptions did Italians hold about Muslims? What tropes did they use? Did Catholicism – and particularly the notion of religious traditionalism – feature in textual or visual depictions of Libyans? Additionally, this study mentions almost no women, children, or any other non-official actors. It would have been helpful to know the reach of the Church's support for empire; did "ordinary" Italians adopt the ideas expressed in Catholic newspapers? Despite these misgivings, *Religion as Resistance* makes a valuable contribution to the growing field of literature about Italian colonialism. Its broad chronological sweep in particular – from the late nineteenth century (Chapter 1) to the 1930s (Chapter 5) – makes it indispensable reading for any student of Italian colonialism.

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