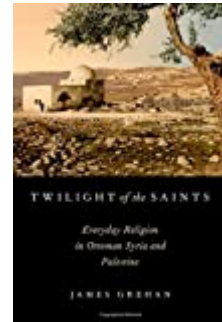




James Grehan. *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 360 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-937303-1.



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Religion in Syria and Palestine

Twilight of the Saints is a deeply engaging and delightful historical ethnography that takes the reader on a journey of exploration into the religious lives and practices of ordinary people—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—living in the countryside of Ottoman Syria and Palestine, from roughly the late seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. The author, James Grehan, is a social historian who is interested in people’s religious behavior as practiced “on the ground,” far away from the world of the literate institutional religion of formal theology, scripture, and law which has always been the focus of historical and religious inquiry by orientalists and other scholars of Semitic religions (p. 4). The book focuses on the people’s lived religion, one characterized by an open and free sharing of beliefs and practices, which often crossed or transcended sectarian boundaries, creating a folk religiosity and a common religious culture that united Muslims, Christians, and Jews as practitioners of what he identifies as “agrarian religion” (p. 14). Described as “the expression of an entire social and economic order whose rhythms were tied to the slow turn-

ings of the seasons, finely attuned to the vagaries of earth, sky, and environment” (p. 16), this agrarian religion was based on a culture of loose accommodations that blended together a common set of rituals, beliefs, and values that involved “the use of propitiatory magic, reverence for miracle-workers, natural cults and spiritual cults, and various forms of ancestor veneration” (p. 192). Distinct from the concepts of “rural” and “popular” religion, and far more encompassing than the Muslim practices of Sufism, agrarian religion transcended urban/rural divides and was part and parcel of a widely shared culture whose practices overshadowed official religious distinctions between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

The concept of agrarian religion anchors Grehan’s thorough discussion and penetrating analysis of the religious culture that dominated the landscape of Syria and Palestine in what historians refer to as the premodern era. What makes his thesis so appealing is his particular view of religion, one shared by most anthropologists and some historians, in which religion is seen not as a distinct cultural subsystem, but rather as an integral and inseparable

arable part of a social world in which people led their lives and performed their cultures. This religious culture was essentially an oral culture that recognized distinctions between the three religious communities but nevertheless established common bonds of shared cultural heritage, allowing members of each community to freely partake in each other's rituals and practices. Given the common geographical, cultural, and theological roots of all three religions, it is not difficult to see why their local adherents sought guidance and support from the same miracle-working saints and venerated the same prophets and saints, visiting and celebrating at their tombs, asking them for favors and intercessions, and turning their tombs into major centers of worship. As practitioners of agrarian religion, the people of the region engaged in religious behavior that was impractical and eclectic and expanded far beyond the narrow sectarian conventions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (p. 19).

The main thesis that guides this book is the notion that, independent of formal Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, the Ottoman subjects of premodern Syria and Palestine created and practiced a living religion that, if viewed by the contemporary practitioners of these three faiths, would seem totally aberrant and alien. They participated in an enduring common religious culture that lasted well into the nineteenth century, but that began to crumble and disintegrate with the advent of modernity and mass literacy. In six concise, well-written, and finely argued chapters, supported by ample appendixes, detailed notes, and an extensive bibliography of original sources, many in Arabic and Turkish, Grehan fleshes out his intriguing thesis about the rise and demise of agrarian religion in the Ottoman Middle East. Notable among his sources is the work of ʿAbd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (1643-1731), a prominent Ottoman theologian, scholar, and Sufi whose travels throughout Syria and Palestine were recorded in a number of ethnographic accounts of the region's cultural and religious practices. His pilgrimage journey from Damascus to Jerusalem, undertaken in 1690, was especially useful for Grehan as it provided detailed descriptions of practically every place of religious significance in the towns and villages that he passed through.

Agrarian religion in the Ottoman Middle East manifested itself first and foremost in the widespread veneration of saints (Arabic singular *wali*, *qiddis*). Recognized by Muslims, Christians, and Jews, saints were magic men (and a few women), who, it was believed, served as intermediaries between the natural and the spiritual worlds. In the remote, uncertain, and lawless world that most ru-

ral people lived in, saints were there to provide protection and to ensure the welfare of their followers. They were healers, miracle-workers, and fortune-tellers, and they engaged in magical practices and divination. In life they were revered, respected, feared, and celebrated; their blessing (*baraka*) was cherished and sought after; their intercession with God provided believers with psychological comfort and a sense of control over their lives; and their performance of marvels (*karamat*) provided clear signs of their having attained God's favor and selection. Examples of these saints included Hindiya, the celebrated Maronite nun, widely revered as a saint (*qiddisa*), whose blessing was sought by women for health and fertility, ʿUmar al-Halabi, whose sainthood was recognized when he was a child, and Khalid al-Naqshabandi, who, among other things, had the ability to deprive his enemies of their sanity. The tombs of these saints, as well as those of various prophets and patriarchs, became sanctuaries, shrines, and sites of pilgrimage. In the absence of formal religious edifices such as mosques and churches, these tombs became the only religious infrastructure available to people living in the countryside. Scattered throughout the region, these tombs defined another characteristic of agrarian religion as one venerating not only living saints, but more significantly, their shrined tombs.

The majority of such tombs were memorials to Muslim saints. Christians, who had a long-established history of officially sanctioned saint commemoration, had shrines of both official and unofficial Christian saints, and although Judaism does not recognize sainthood per se, local Jews visited and prayed at shrines and tombs of biblical prophets and patriarchs as well as some of their historically significant rabbis. A hierarchy of prophets and saints determined which of these tombs and shrines were visited, by whom, and how often. The prophet Moses, for example, given the high regard with which he was held by all three religions, had seven shrines, only one of which, outside the city of Jericho, became the officially recognized site after the Mamluk sultan Baybars built a mausoleum, thereby giving it state-sponsored legitimacy. This recognition was later sealed when the Ottoman state gave its official seal of approval by sponsoring the annual spring pilgrimage to the tomb of Moses. Although Grehan points to the universal appeal of such tombs, it should be kept in mind that these sites occasionally became sites of contestation and exclusion, even before the advent of the modern era that eroded the theretofore universal appeal of shared saints, prophets, tombs, and shrines.

Other aspects of agrarian religion discussed by Grehan include sacred landscapes, such as holy rocks (the Dome of the Rock in al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem stands out as a major example, but also the Rock of Job outside Damascus and the Bed of Abraham outside Hebron), holy caves (the tomb of John the Baptist in Sebastiyya outside Nablus), sacred springs (É¸Ayn Silwan outside Jerusalem), holy trees (the Tree of Abraham outside Hebron); these were associated with folk interpretations of stories from all three religions and linked and interwoven with pagan reverence for nature that, according to the author, is so characteristic of agrarian religion. The omnipresent world of spirits and genies (*jinn*) and evil spirits (É¸afrit), many of whom lurk around housetops, or who appear in the guise of snakes, also characterized agrarian religion. So did spirit possession, the use of spells, talismans, icons, love potions, charms, protection from evil eye, and anything that would assure good health, fertility for barren women, sexual attention from a wayward husband, or any needs, wishes, or desires a person might have. Regardless of their formal religious affiliation, men of religion were treated as potential experts on magic. In the city of Nablus, for example, Muslim women turned to Samaritan rabbis for love amulets and fertility charms. Grehan goes so far as to suggest that even the Bible and the QurÉ¸an became âmagical objects,â passages from which were worn as potent talismans (p. 154). In fact, so pervasive was the belief in talismans that it was not unusual for Christians in Mt. Lebanon to wear amulets that contained verses from the QurÉ¸an. Agrarian religion permeated all aspects of life, and even death, in Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Mystics communicated with the dead, visions appeared unannounced and unexpected, dreamers communed with the souls of the dead, and cemeteries were inhabited not only by the bodies of the dead, but more significantly, by their lurking spirits and souls.

Accompanying this magical world of agrarian religion were rules and protocols for behavior appropriate to the religious culture of the time. Pilgrims were expected to behave in a well-mannered fashion. Humility, respect, and deference were expected and always observed, so as not to anger or disturb the saints. If prayers were not answered, women sometimes resorted to dramatic gestures such as breast exposure as a last attempt at attaining the sympathy of the saints. Gifts and offerings such as coins, beads, carpets, and jars were repeatedly made to the saints, and tokens were left as a reminder to the saints of vows taken. The strongest statement and ultimate act of appeasement any worshipper could make was animal

sacrifice, an integral part of the religious culture of the times and one that continues to be integral to Islam, and to a lesser extent, eastern Christianity. In addition to being an offering, animal sacrifice highlighted the symbolic significance of blood, often applied to the face or smeared on house entrances, as a cleanser and an accompaniment to all new beginnings.

The sharing of folk religious practices extended into religious architecture, most notably in the willingness of adherents of Christianity and Islam to share formal houses of worship. Given the long history of houses of worship being converted from churches into mosques, especially after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the memory of the holiness of such sites was carried forth through succeeding generations of local Christians. In fact, many of Christianityâs important local landmarks functioned as âmixed shrinesâ that drew both Muslim and Christian pilgrims (p. 183). Celebrating religious holidays further illustrated the shared religious culture of the times. Since members of all three communities lived together, they knew of each otherâs religious observances and how they were performed. Hence during Passover and Purim, Muslims and Christians visited and celebrated with their Jewish neighbors, and such visits were reciprocated in turn. As Grehan explains, what existed in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Syria and Palestine was a culture of tolerance, accommodation, familiarity, and inclusiveness, anchored in an agrarian religion that brought together the members of the three religious communities. This common religious culture did not necessarily erase sectarian identity and consciousness, however; rather, it helped blur them in peoplesâ daily lives, especially in the performance of daily rituals, festivals, and rites of passage. Thus, while wedding rites and funerary customs followed different liturgical dictates, they were, to the casual observer, virtually indistinguishable from one religion to the next. The only practice that ensured the continued survival of each of these communities was in the choice of marriage partners; distinct group identity was based on strict adherence to, and enforcement of, religious endogamy.

This âidyllicâ state of affairs, as described by Grehan, was finally brought to an end by the âonslaught of modernity,â a state of affairs characterized by the sharpening of sectarian consciousness, the cultivation of a new religious discipline, and a shift toward a more strictly scriptural interpretation of religious tradition (p. 196). By the end of the nineteenth century, the tenets of agrarian religion came under attack by secularists and by religious reformers, both of whom lashed out at supersti-

tious customs and practices. Improved literacy exposed people to written scriptures and texts, introducing them to more sophisticated and nuanced interpretations of theology and religious law. The arrival of European missionaries, traders, and various "modernizers," as well as other precursors to colonialist and imperialist rule, generated separatist identities based on allegiances to sect and religion. These and other historical factors eventually led to the slow death of agrarian religion in the region, ushering in a new, more sectarian religious and ideological culture, one that accentuated, rather than blurred, religious difference.

This book is a welcome attempt to bring together the theories and methods of two different fields of study, social history and cultural anthropology. As a historical ethnography, it succeeds in describing a period in Middle Eastern history that suggests a world of harmonious and peaceful coexistence. Its main strength, as a strong reminder of a religious culture based on agrarian religious practices that stressed a common religiosity that bonded the followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, is also its main weakness. The picture painted by the author sometimes simplifies, and often glosses over, many significant turbulent periods (e.g., the Druze-Maronite conflict in the 1860s) in which relations were not necessarily harmonious and coexistence was subject to the vagaries of the exercise of power. Did modernity indeed bring about the end of a period in which peaceful coexistence was actually the norm rather than the exception? Grehan seems to think so. Extending his discussion to in-

clude examples of agrarian religious practices from India and China, he notes that the sharing of shrines and temples across sectarian boundaries provided worshippers with otherworldly blessing and protection that ensured mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Some might argue that this viewpoint is too idealistic, and is hardly reflective of how sects and ethnic groups maintain and negotiate identities and boundaries, as described and theorized by anthropologists. Others might quibble with the way Grehan uncritically uses categories such as culture without clearly defining and explaining them. Regardless, Grehan is a very engaging writer; the religious culture he describes is enchanting and beautiful, the portrait a richly detailed ethnography more than a historical account. Given the hold that contemporary religion seems to have over the political and social lives of people in the region, the book can be read as a nostalgic escape to an imagined past. Grehan wants to erase the "strange amnesia" that has all but washed away centuries of mutual coexistence based on common cultural practices, replacing it with a view that privileges bonds of common religion over those of common culture and has led to seemingly endless interreligious and sectarian conflict (p. 206). An evocation of a happier, more peaceful past, written in the service of an anticipated better future, is a worthwhile endeavor; Grehan undertakes this task with a subtly suggested conviction that the religious harmony of the past, if fully acknowledged and appreciated, might overcome the religious violence of the present and provide a model for a better future.

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