

**Heather Sharkey *A History of Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East*,
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, “380 p.”**

Reviewed by Anais Massot

In the past two decades, scholars of the Ottoman Empire have brought to light the importance of material culture and consumption patterns in understanding the fabric of Ottoman societies. Yet, cultural history, the use of anthropology to examine the social history of collective representations in a specific culture, is still underrepresented in textbooks and general literature on the Ottoman Empire. Heather Sharkey’s book, “A History of Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East,” manages to fill this gap in the scholarship by offering a wider narrative of the transformation of religious communities in the Middle East through the prism of cultural history.

Although Sharkey explores interconfessional relations in the Middle East beginning from the seventh century, the bulk of her book focuses on the Ottoman Empire from the 1700s to the 1920s; the so-called “age of modernity.” She presents case studies from various Ottoman provinces thereby bringing into perspective transformations in various regions of the empire. She analyses how Ottoman societies shifted from being characterised by religious diversity, albeit in hierarchical form, to areas distinguished by emigration, and violence between religious groups, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Three major interrelated questions tie the book together: What did religion mean in the everyday life of Ottoman subjects? When did it matter more than other factors as an explanatory and motivational framework? In which contexts did Christians, Jews, and Muslims converge and when did they diverge? (p.18)

Sharkey does not offer a definitive answer to these questions, but rather identifies spaces and times of convergence and divergence, thereby pointing to the importance of imperial, international, and local contexts in shaping the importance of religion. (p.244) While religion can explain numerous societal dynamics, she argues that its explanatory power is limited as it is often invoked to justify behaviour motivated by socioeconomic factors, resentment, and fears. (p. 17)

In chapter one, Sharkey proposes a new way of looking at interconfessional relations by moving away from a sensationalist emphasis on conflict and violence towards an analysis of everyday encounters between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim individuals in Ottoman cities. Sharkey presents an archaeology of interconfessional relations by laying out a vast array of sources, including memoirs, music, cookbooks, relics, as well as material objects of everyday life such as clothing, silverware, and food. She argues that an exploration of the unsensational and mundane is more revealing of the way in which members of religious communities saw themselves and interacted with others. (p. 4) In one sense, this book is Sharkey’s attempt at an archaeology of religious identity and interconfessional relations, analysing how objects, as symbolic markers, are relevant in defining social hierarchies and behaviours. She reconstitutes the “emotional landscapes” of Christians, Muslims and Jews, encompassing senses such as smell, touch, sounds and taste to present an unsensational but sense-rich picture of Ottoman plural societies. (p.9)

In chapter two the author follows the development of the concept of the *dhimma* in early Islamic empires. This legal status for non-Muslims allowed other religious groups to be incorporated into the system of rule, albeit with subordinate status and often subjected to restrictions regarding movement and worship. It was developed as a mean to create and reinforce social hierarchies between religious communities, borrowing from Byzantine and Sassanian policies. Incrementally, both law and social practices, such as clothing restrictions, reinforced distinctions between religious groups. Yet, through the analysis of cookbooks and music among others, Sharkey demonstrates that popular culture offered a space of influence and interdependence between Christians, Jews and Muslims. (p.51) Sharkey argues that Islamic societies were also shaped by the influence of non-Muslims into their realm. (p.53)

In chapter three, Sharkey explores the Ottoman Empire until the end of the eighteenth century. In a period defined by crisis and adaptation, Sharkey looks at how successful the Ottoman Empire was in “managing diversity” through the analysis of the uses and production of everyday objects. (p.64) She presents the Ottoman policies towards non-Muslims in its realm as a continuation of former Islamic states’ policies, while at the same time pointing out the specificities of governmentality in a modern empire in line with neighbouring empires. (p.64-69) Sharkey examines how various social hierarchies, based on religion but also on profession, class and language, were reinforced or challenged through social and legal practices. She argues that longevity was ensured through the existence of a framework that could accommodate and adapt to change. As such, the *dhimma* offered a certain stability to interconfessional relations. (p.104) However, a turning point occurred during the eighteenth century when the framework of continuity with the past was challenged, transforming the “social landscape between and within communities”. (p.65)

Chapter four deals with the age of the *Tanzimat* (1808-1876) and the historical roots of Ottoman reform. Sharkey defines modernity as the rise of individualistic economic, political, and social behaviours, which challenged existing social contracts and political hierarchies. (p.71) The Ottoman state reacted in conflicting ways to these changes of the nineteenth century by emphasising equality yet reifying non-Muslim communities as political entities. (p.165) Sharkey addresses interconfessional violence in this period as a consequence of a number of factors including the assertion of external state power, the demise of the feudal order, the rise of a new commercial elite, and the development of sectarianism as process of politicization of religious identities. (p.147-149) The social change and economic disparity between religious communities that arose out of these changes gave rise to resentments which forms the backdrop of inter-confessional violence of the period, including the attack against Christians in Aleppo in 1850 and in Damascus in 1860. (p.147)

Chapter five deals with the era of Abdulhamid II (r.1876-1909). As Sultan he used pan-Islamic and religious discourse to legitimize his absolutist rule among Muslim subjects in a time of increasing military defeats and threats of secessions or rebellion. Then, as a result of state policy and missionary influence, religion was increasingly conceived as a matter of belief rather than only public identification. (p.227) Sharkey looks at what this meant for everyday life of Ottoman subjects. The main question here is whether Abdulhamid II’s pan-Islamic discourse and policies reinforced the importance of religion – Sharkey identifies two contradictory outcomes. In places such as eastern Anatolia, where social inequalities between Christians and Muslims aggravated and ethno-nationalist ideas developed, religion gained in importance, while in urban centres such as Damascus and Cairo, its importance was weakened by the creation of secular social spaces. (p.182-183)

Sharkey ends her book with an analysis of paths of convergence and divergence at the end of the Ottoman empire. She addresses the paradox of increased equality of status and the development of secular spaces with the simultaneous calcification of religious identities and interconfessional violence. (p. 243-245) She emphasises the endurance of religion as a mode of social classification that was capable of translating itself into new secular spaces of sociability, that could end up providing a forum for religious agendas, challenging the convention dichotomous perception of a struggle between conservatives and reformists. (p.245) By the end of the nineteenth century, a large part of the Muslim population felt beleaguered by socioeconomic transformations and their resentment contributed, among others, to large-scale massacres of Armenians in Anatolia at the end of the nineteenth century. (p. 247, 270) A framework of legitimisation provided by state discourse enabled such catastrophes to occur. (p. 269)

This book is well crafted and provides a fresh way to introduce students to the historiography of the Ottoman Empire. Sharkey presents the major debates within the field of Ottoman history while at the same time proposing a novel way of addressing the history of religious communities, making the book thought-provoking for specialists as well. She successfully tackles the puzzling question of religion’s role in the Ottoman Empire by emphasising change and variability as a defining aspect of the

everyday practices of religion, yet at the same time pointing to long-term transformations of the meanings of religion over the centuries of Ottoman rule. (p 17)

Anais Massot is a PhD student at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS-Césor) and Leiden University. She is interested in interconfessional relations and socio-political changes in Ottoman Syria.