
Reviewed by Sherwan Hindreen Ali

James Grehan’s thought-provoking new book *Twilight of the Saints* is a fascinating account of popular religion in the late-era Ottoman provinces of Syria and Palestine. By painting a colorful mural of a world that no longer exists, depicting widespread syncretic religious practices, rituals, and ceremonies in villages and towns outside the urban strongholds of official and literate religion, Grehan adds much to our knowledge of life in pre-20th century Greater Syria. Drawing upon a diverse pool of sources, including memoirs of native belles-lettres, accounts of missionaries and travellers, official governmental and ecclesiastical registries, and scholarly works from various periods, *Twilight of The Saints* is a valuable addition to the fields of religious and Middle Eastern studies.

Grehan begins with an account of mid 18th century Damascus. After a particularly harrowing swarm of locusts invaded the town and its environs, local communities, through various rituals and ceremonies, appealed to a legendary bird to save Damascus from the swarm. This magical bird, named *samarmar*, can only be lured to Damascus if a group of Sufis were to travel to Persia, draw water from an enchanted spring there and, while never facing backward or letting the cargo stay under a roof or touch the ground, return to Damascus (1). This odd process and fantastic bird have no connection to Islam, Christianity, or any known religion in the Middle East according to Grehan. It reflects an older understanding that predates organized and universalizing religions that have gone extinct today. This tale sets the tone for the rest of the book, as it explores the diverse religious landscapes of Ottoman Syria and Palestine.

Then, Grehan also offers a brief, but valuable, description of historical developments and problems that accompany the study of religion. Eschewing traditional academic theories that reduce and constrain religious expressions to binaries like “popular” versus “elite”, or “rural” versus “urban”, Grehan offers an innovative framework for better understanding pre-modern religion, which he calls “agrarian religion” (14). Agrarian religion was the “religious mainstream” which was “as much urban as it was rural [...] it was the expression of an entire social and economic order whose rhythms were tied to the slow turning of the seasons, finely tuned to the vagaries of earth, sky and environment” (16). In other words, agrarian religion is the primordial form of human religion, a remarkably durable collection of practices with the primary aim of appeasing spirits, saints, and nature so as to protect people from a vast and unpredictable world full of incomprehensible dangers. Furthermore, agrarian religion is distinct although entwined with state-sponsored, imperial religions like Islam and Christianity, since it adopted their veneer to survive across the centuries. As to his sources, Grehan utilizes an impressive variety of works to support his analysis. He cites descriptions and narratives from Western anthropologists, missionaries, and pre-colonial Western counselors’ discourses, while also drawing upon writings by Muslims and Christians native to the region. For instance, the travelogues of ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nablusi, a 17th century Damascene Sunni scholar and Sufi, which detail the religious landscapes of various areas in the Levant, are referred to frequently throughout the book. The writings of Mikha’il Mishaqa, a diplomat and historian who lived in
19th century Syria and Lebanon and wrote extensively about the major political and social upheavals of that period, are also often quoted and referenced.

The first chapter describes how the configuration of religion institutions and their weaknesses outside urban centers helped maintain agrarian religion. The second and third chapters explain the ubiquitousness of holy men and saintly shrines and their centrality to the agrarian religious worldview. Some of these shrines were local and known only to the inhabitants of a village or two, while others attracted pilgrims from distant lands, such as the shrine of the renowned female Sufi Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya outside of Jerusalem and the shrine of John the Baptist in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. The same applied to saints and miracle workers; some were wandering mendicants found in small towns, villages, and cities, while others were so highly regarded that Muslims and Christians competed for their blessings, like the Maronite nun Hindiyya (62). Chapters four and five detail various cults of nature, often operating with a light Islamic or Christian veneer, and the pervasive world of spirits and magic that encompassed life during that period. Ancient trees, fantastically-shaped rock formations, and majestic waterfalls were often revered by locals and constituted sites of refuge, votive offerings, and blood sacrifices for people from all religions. Likewise, ancient ruins and thick forests were either seen as locations blessed by holy saints and prophets, or haunted landscapes filled with Jinn and demons that were to be avoided at all costs. Finally, chapter six examines various intra-sectarian prayers, blood offerings, and other rituals invoked to appease and protect from harms, both real and imaginary, that were commonplace in pre-modern life. When available rudimentary forms of medical help failed, as they often did, believers would turn to shrines, Sufis, and monks for help. In one account, a Muslim pilgrim to a local shrine in Rashaya, Lebanon vowed to St. Elias that she would baptize her sick son in a local church if the saint would heal him, and she held true to her promise after the child recuperated (178). The devout would walk on foot for miles and offer expensive sacrifices to elicit help from dead saints and prophets. The more famous and potent the saints or shrines, the more expensive were the costs of supplications and the more complex the rituals necessary to ensure that a saint would hear requests. Sectarian affiliations mattered little as Muslim men sought guidance from esteemed rabbis and Christian towns prepared feasts in celebration for the sojourn of famous Sufis. Records of Christians and Muslims celebrating the Jewish Passover, Christians fasting on Ramadan, and Muslims making pilgrimage to sites of Marian apparitions further prove the syncretic resiliency of agrarian religion.

How and when did this millennia-old religious worldview cease to exist? Grehan makes a convincing case that what heralded “modern” religion’s conquest and the final end of agrarian religion was a tripartite movement of mass literacy, scriptural ascendency, and the “sharpening of sectarian consciousness” (196). This change in religion was a slow process. By the beginning of the 20th century, agrarian religion still dominated the countryside where most of the population lived (202). It wasn’t until the post-World War II era, in which rapid urbanization and advancements in medicine and agriculture greatly reduced the need for saints and shrines, that “modern” religion truly takes over (205). Modernity has no place or need for miracle-workers, spirits, or magic, and it reduces popular religion to superstitions beneath the modern, rational man.

One weakness in the book is that it tends to make absolute claims and thus somewhat overstate the matter. While it is true that modernity marginalized popular religious practices like shrine
visitation and talisman usage, it hasn’t erased them, even today. Relatedly, while religious reforms in 20th century Middle East condemned what was once seen as scripturally-backed forms or acts of religious devotions like blood sacrifice and praying for saintly intercession, they still have their believers, with the latter being especially popular among Sufis and Shi’is in the Middle East and beyond. Another example of this tendency to overstate would be Grehan’s statement that religious conversions were purely social phenomena with little to no impact on the individual’s personal convictions (194-95). This contradicts with some the statements cited in the book. For example, the aforementioned Mikha’il Mishaqa is quoted in the book saying he converted to Protestantism from his native Melkite Catholic church after he came to believe that the former is more faithful to Christian scripture (199).

In conclusion, *Twilight of The Saints* is a must-read for anyone interested in historical changes in religiosity in the Middle East. University students and scholars will find this book, with its detailed charts of religious infrastructure and the demographic distribution of religious communities, a goldmine of information, complete with primary and secondary sources about Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Similarly, non-academics will find it accessible, informative, and entertaining to read. Grehan’s writing is direct and unembellished, but also scholarly and impressive. His avoidance of unnecessary academic jargon, erudite usage of primary sources, and entertaining narratives of life in Ottoman Syria and Palestine is a delightfully balanced and enjoyable read.

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