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Review of *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis then Revival*

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Book review: *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis then Revival*. By Khalid S. Dinno. Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 43. Piscataway, N.J. : Gorgias, 2017. xx + 506 pp. \$85.00 cloth.

Khalid S. Dinno has written an account of the Syrian Orthodox Church, focusing upon a critical time in its history: the late Ottoman period and early decades of the twentieth century. *The Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis then Revival*, a revision of the author's dissertation, is magisterial in its breadth and depth. It is a timely contribution. Historians of Syriac and Byzantine Christianity have described how dissidents of the council of Chalcedon gradually became a separate Syrian Orthodox Church in the sixth through eighth centuries. Others have worked on the cultural renaissance of the Syrian Orthodox Christians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. At the other end of the historical spectrum, anthropological studies like that of N. Atto (*Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora* [Leiden University Press, 2001]) have analyzed questions of identity and nomenclature as they pertain to modern Christians of the Syrian/Assyrian heritage living outside of the Middle East. Dinno's book tells the unstudied story of what happened to the church in

between those periods. In order to gather his historical data, Dinno spent many hours in monastic and ecclesiastical archives in the Middle East. He writes an organized and methodical account of the persecution and hardships that the Syrian Orthodox faced. He then shows how the church experienced a renaissance in the twentieth century on account of the guidance of its scholars and bishops.

In the introduction, Dinno presents a condensed account of the history of the Syrian Orthodox church from its beginnings up through the medieval period. He narrates the circumstances and conditions for the Syrian Orthodox Christians living "Under the Ottoman Umbrella" in the Millet system (chapter 1) and then in the nineteenth century (chapter 2). Despite being controlled by the Ottomans, Syrian Orthodox leaders enjoyed limited autonomy which allowed them to strengthen their community. But the arrival of Western missionaries, attempting to convert the Syrian Orthodox to Catholicism or Protestantism, resulted in a divided Syrian Orthodox church, both in the Middle East and in India. Dinno then treats the relationship of the Syrian Orthodox Church with the Anglican Church (chapter 3), illuminating the complexity of their competing interests in the Syrian Christians of southern India. He discusses the period of 1885–1914 in his church's history (chapter 4), when wars of independence and the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire led to unrest and violence against the Armenians, Syrian Orthodox, and Assyrian (Church of the East) communities. Chapter 5 treats the notorious and devastating *Sayfo* ("sword") massacres that targeted Christians in Anatolia in 1915. He describes the exodus that ensued. The Syrian Orthodox from Anatolia who were fleeing genocide took refuge in Arab lands, which also gave them the opportunity to "reverse the pattern of decline" (308) and rebuild their church. Dinno then discusses the revival that took place in the church beginning in the 1930s, which he attributes to the vision and leadership of Syrian Orthodox scholars and bishops. He explores how the Syrian Orthodox Church became involved in the ecumenical movement in the 1960s, ending his book with a plea for greater unity among the Syriac churches who must "acknowledge their common heritage" and "make it available and relevant first to their people, who will in turn share it with their Western counterparts" (304).

This book gives scholars access to untold stories of Christian history. Readers have a glimpse at a Christianity that developed distinct qualities as it persevered as a minority religion under Islam and struggled to keep its autonomy against the pressures of Western missionary movements. Dinno's work also calls attention to charismatic and pastoral leaders of his church who cultivated substantive relationships with the laity, showing how this was an "essential ingredient for the survival of this small church throughout the many hard times in its history" (306). The Syrian Orthodox Church lost many both to *Sayfo* (which wiped out half of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Middle East) and to conversion to other Christianities. But as Dinno's work shows, the remarkable vision and leadership of individuals like Aphram Barsoum, Ni'matullah Denno, and the priest-monk Yohannon Dolabani saved the church from eradication. These "revivalists," as Dinno argues, energized the Syrian Orthodox community by reminding the church of its esteemed apostolic and Aramaic heritage. They made this heritage accessible through the translation of Syriac texts into Arabic, educating the community about its venerable past (310).

Dinno's book is a gift both to the scholarly community as well as his own Syriac Church. The book's appendix, with its rich collection of letters and archival documents, contains information that will lead to further study. A significant further avenue of exploration, for example, will be the role that Syrian

Orthodox women played in the revival process of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The book contains data on persons, relationships, and events in the church's history that will be important for digital scholarship on the Syriac cultural heritage. No book in any language has tackled this topic and time period in such a thorough way, and this work will be henceforth a starting point for anyone interested in the history of the Syrian Orthodox Church.

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By Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent