Is anti-Zionism the latest manifestation of an age-old antisemitism? It can be, and this book effectively shows how anti-Zionist rhetoric is fortified and entrenched when peppered with antisemitic demonization imagery, delegitimation, and double standards. The tools of cognitive science offer many insights into how and why these discourses blend so seamlessly, and it is valid to be concerned with how the language of anti-Zionism gives the myths and stereotypes of antisemitism an aura of acceptability in a global environment where other forms of racism and discrimination are stigmatized. But there are clearly other strands of discourse evident in the texts and interviews examined. Israel can also be singled out as Western, capitalist, aggressive, racist—even if, at times, in an arguably erroneous or wrongheaded manner—without this discourse being antisemitic, in the sense of being in continuity with the mythology defined as such at the start of the book.

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Muslim-Christian Relations in Late-Ottoman Palestine: Where Nationalism and Religion Intersect
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Scholarly interest in the Christian populations of Palestine has increased significantly in recent years, notably for the period of the British Mandate, with narratives of endemic sectarianism and Palestinian political homogeneity increasingly challenged in favour of a more complicated picture that demonstrates the marginalization of Christians under British rule. In the Ottoman context, using Michelle Campos’s (2011) framework of ‘Ottoman brothers’ to consider relations among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Palestine has set a narrative based around the centrality of civic and performative Ottomanism, privileging the provincial context over the perspective of the centre and demonstrating the processes that led to the adoption or rejection of an Ottoman identity. Yet in the literature in general, Palestinian Christians remain overshadowed by discussions of Muslims and Jews, and by studies of their co-religionists in neighbouring territories like Lebanon and Egypt, particularly in relation to discourses of the Nahda, the Arabic literary and cultural movement of the nineteenth century. Freas’s contribution is therefore a welcome one, providing a narrative of the development of an ‘Arab’ identity among Palestinian Christians, the tensions between a reforming and encroaching imperial administration, and the entrenchment of European influence.

The introduction poses a number of important questions. What did Ottomanism—the ideology of equality under a civic Ottoman identity—mean for Christians, who although second-class subjects of a kind, were also privileged through the
protections of European diplomats? What did it mean to adopt an ‘Arab’ identity, when Arab culture and language were intertwined with Islam? Yet one issue is missing from the introductory narrative, and the study in general, and that is a sense of the differences among the various Christian denominations – Greek Orthodox, Roman and Eastern-Rite Catholic, Armenians, and others – in terms of their responses to the challenges of the final decades of Ottoman rule. Resting on a ledge under a window on one of the holiest sites of Christendom, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, sits the so-called ‘immovable ladder’, which has perched in the same spot since the eighteenth century owing to a lack of agreement among the different Christian groups as to whom it belongs. This ladder remains a potent symbol of the often intractable inter-confessional Christian rivalries in the Holy Land. Perhaps the sources that Freas consulted do not indicate that any rivalries affected the narrative he constructs, although hints of discord are dropped here and there; most notably with respect to the role of Christian denominations as participants in the contests of inter-European rivalries, with disputes over holy sites between Orthodox and Catholic Palestinians concurrently reproducing the tensions between their respective ‘protectors’, Russia and France (p. 122).

Freas delineates three significant developments that shaped the Christians of Palestine and their relations with their Muslim compatriots: the nationalist uprisings of Christians in the Balkans under the patronage of the European powers; the disproportionate increase in Christian clout due to the Tanzimat – the reforms of the nineteenth century – and the protection of the European powers; and the overlap of ‘Arab’ and Muslim identities. The first three chapters provide concise overviews of their subjects, essentially setting the scene for what is to come in the remainder of the book. Chapter 1 provides a helpful analysis of what being Arab has meant as a political, cultural, and national identity, and Chapter 2, ‘The Sick Man of Europe’, gives a clear overview of the problems facing the Ottoman state both in general and vis-à-vis Palestine, particularly with regard to the Egyptian invasion and occupation. Chapter 3 considers the integration and discrimination of Christian communities in Palestine, offering a valuable summary of local differences in terms of the implementation of sartorial laws and other forms of state and local oppression.

It is not until Chapter 4 – ‘Christians and Reform’ – that we get to the essence of the book, in which Freas considers the implications of the Tanzimat. There are some unnecessary diversions here, to the Crusades and American Civil Rights, but the discussion of the Majālis al-Idāra, the local administrative councils in which Muslims and non-Muslims shared local governance, reveals the limitations of reform. The sources here are primarily from British consuls in Jerusalem, and so the narrative lacks a sense of the impact of these changes from the local Christian Arab perspective. As Avi Rubin’s (2011) study of the nizāmīye (new civil) courts makes clear, the British consuls were hostile to, and openly critical of these Ottoman legal reforms, and thus the lack of Arabic or Ottoman sources distorts the picture and limits the impact of the section on non-Muslim testimony in that institution. Nonetheless, Europeans were a central part of this story, as ably demonstrated in Chapter 5, ‘The Empire is Open for Business’. The argument that Christians benefitted disproportionally from the reform period.
in the Ottoman Empire and from an increasing European political and economic presence in Palestine is not a new one, but Freas outlines the key points here with clarity. One of the more profound impacts of the European presence in Palestine was the establishment of missionary-run schools aimed at the local Arab population (and Christians in particular), which represented a direct challenge to an Ottoman state that was investing in its own education system across the Empire. This issue is dealt with in Chapter 6, ‘Open Season for Evangelising’, and although we get a good sense of influence exerted Palestinian Christians by these two competing systems, much of the recent scholarship on education in the Ottoman Empire is missing from the analysis, as are local sources that might have given us a new and interesting perspective.

The key themes and tensions developed so far reach their conclusions in the final two chapters. In Chapter 7, Freas discusses the end of the oppression of Christians by local Muslims and the central authorities, arguing that interactions moved towards a melodrama of protest on the part of the Christians at the merest slight or insult offered to their community. The evidence for this is again largely from the British consular records, and so it is difficult to ascertain how far this was an equally exaggerated observation by consular officials; petitions to the local and imperial authorities, newspaper and journal articles, or, indeed observations by other European diplomats in the region besides the British would have helped in really making sense of this development. The section on commercial success and elite status is more substantiated, but given the wealth of sources available for the period, one might have hoped for more primary evidence. Again, as a synthesis this works nicely, but the Christian Arab perspective loses out to the testimony of other historical actors. Chapter 8, ‘Arab Nationalism, Abdülhamid II, and the CUP’, takes us on a whirlwind tour through the complex and tempestuous final decades of Ottoman rule in Palestine, in a succinct overview of the key developments and attitudes of the period, finishing this study with the arrival of Zionism in Palestine. Many Christian Palestinians offered strong opposition to Zionism, providing a unifying bond between Muslims and Christians in the late Ottoman period. Although rivalries and tensions between these two communities remained, this key example of cooperation in Christian-Muslims relations, supported by a wealth of sources in newspapers and official reports, might have been explored more carefully as an example of Ottomanism in practice, permitting an analysis of what was specifically ‘Christian’ about the political stances of the Palestinian Christians.

On the whole, Freas offers clear and coherent arguments, which are for the most part convincing, particularly in terms of articulating the impact of European influence among the Christians. That said, some nuance around the different denominations would have been helpful. Additionally, the silence of Palestinian Christian voices is often keenly felt, and it has to be said that the reliance on British consular records means that the stated themes of this book are not satisfactorily delivered. We do not really get a sense of the processes of the supposed influence upon Palestinian Christians of non-Arab nationalist movements dominated by Christians, such as in Greece or Bulgaria, nor how Palestinian Christians perceived the apparent tension of an Arab identity being synonymous
with a Muslim one. As such, whilst this book provides a coherent and concise impression of an important subject, within it, our understanding of the discourse of and among Palestinian Christians remains overshadowed by narratives about them.

References

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