# Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World

## The Roots of Sectarianism

Bruce Masters' book explores the history of Christians and Jews in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire and how their identities as non-Muslims evolved over four hundred years. At the start of this period, in the sixteenth century, social community was circumscribed by religious identity and non-Muslims lived within the hierarchy established by Muslim law. In the nineteenth century, however, in response to Western influences, a radical change took place. Conflict erupted between Muslims and Christians in different parts of the empire in a challenge to that hierarchy. In the Balkans and Anatolia, sectarian animosities gave way to nationalist ones as religious identities were transformed by the political vocabulary imported from the West, while in the Arab provinces, the language of nationalism helped heal the rift between sectarian communities as their elites tentatively embraced a new political identity as Arabs. By contrast Arabic-speaking Jews experienced neither the outrage of their Muslim neighbors nor the internal struggle over identity experienced by the Christian communities. By maintaining their traditional religio-political boundaries, they were much slower to recast themselves as Arabs. As the author illustrates in this thought-provoking and lucid history, it is these religious and ethnic ambiguities which have to a large extent informed the rhetoric of religious fundamentalism in the empire's successor states throughout the twentieth century. In this way, the book negotiates the present through the past, thereby contributing to an understanding of the political and religious tensions of the modern Middle East.

BRUCE MASTERS is Professor of History at Wesleyan University. His publications include *The Origins of Western Economic Dominance in the Middle East* (1988) and (with Edhem Eldem and Daniel Goffman) *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul* (1999).

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BRUCE MASTERS

*Wesleyan University*

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For Russ and Sheila Murphy

*Sláinte agus saol agaibh*
*Talamh gan chíos agaibh . . .*
*Ó Bhealtaine amach*

# Contents

# Acknowledgments

This work was a long time in the making. Its origins lie in several different research projects on unrelated aspects of the history of Aleppo and Syria. When I set out on the journey, it was not my intention to write about non-Muslims as the main actors. Rather I wanted to assess how the peoples of the Middle East adapted to the changes they experienced in the Ottoman Empire's last century. In seeking to understand the West's impact on the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, however, each research avenue I embarked upon led me back to the non-Muslims. I simply could not ignore the communities where that impact was felt first.

The research for this project was conducted primarily at the National Archives in Damascus, where Mme. Da$^{c}$d al-Hakim was gracious and helpful as always, the Prime Minister's Archive in Istanbul, and the Public Records Office in London. I want to thank the staff of all three institutions for their help and the governments of the Republic of Turkey and the Syrian Arab Republic for granting me permission to conduct research in their state archives. I would also like to thank the funding bodies that made research in the region possible. These include the Fulbright Commission, the American Research Institute in Turkey, and Wesleyan University.

As a result of its rather lengthy gestation period, this study has gone through several different incarnations, has been presented in part at various academic venues, and has been commented upon by various people at different times and in a variety of places. Parts of it have appeared as papers delivered at Middle Eastern Studies Association conferences over the past decade and a lecture series at the National University of Ireland-Maynooth, Republic of Ireland. I have also discussed my conclusions at talks given at Rice, Princeton and, what was for me the most personally satisfying, before my social science colleagues at the Davenport Public Affairs Center, Wesleyan University. Of those who have critiqued versions of the work, either in part or *in toto* or otherwise given encouragement, I would like to thank Leila Fawaz, Dina Rizk Khoury, Daniel Goffman, Abdul-Karim Rafeq, Molly Greene, Ruairí Ó hUiginn, and Ussama Makdisi. I also would like to thank Marigold Acland at Cambridge University Press for

being the editor most of us in the scholarly profession can only dream of finding. Lastly, I would like to thank my Wesleyan colleague, Russ Murphy, who over literally hundreds of cups of coffee during the past five years has patiently heard the genesis of every argument I make in this book with good humor and more than a bit of skepticism. I dedicate this book to him and to Sheila, his lifelong soul mate, for their hospitality and friendship over the years.

# Note on transliteration and terms

I have chosen to transcribe Arabic names and technical terms following the modified system used by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* without the diacritical marks beyond the use of an apostrophe for the *hamza* in the middle of a word and a raised case "c" for the "ʿayn." Ottoman Turkish names and terms are transcribed according to the rules of Modern Turkish except that I have retained voiced final consonants, Mehmed rather than Mehmet.

The choice of terms for places and peoples is more difficult. What should we call the lands that constituted the Ottoman Arab provinces? Egypt presents no difficulty as all agreed both then and now that the valley and delta of the Nile constituted one geographical unit although there was some dispute over where to demarcate the southern boundary. But elsewhere the names we now call the various parts of the Fertile Crescent and their inhabitants in English had no currency for most of the Ottoman centuries. For the Europeans, there was a clear distinction between Palestine as the "Holy Land" of the Christians or *Eretz Israel* of the Jews and Syria which otherwise incorporated all the habitable lands south of the Taurus Mountains and between the Mediterranean and the Syrian Desert. The name Lebanon was used by both locals and Europeans but referred only to the mountains in the northern part of the present-day republic of the same name. The Ottoman authorities if pressed for a single name would have called the lands south of Anatolia simply Arabistan. Some modern scholars prefer the term *Bilad al-Sham* (the country of Damascus) as that was the term sometimes employed by Ottoman Arabs living in Damascus. Those authors who lived in Damascus' northern rival Aleppo never used that designation, however, and would have most probably bristled had they been told that was the name of their country. In an attempt to minimize confusion, I have used the current political designation for the most part even if in the case of some, i.e. Iraq, they are completely anachronistic. I have chosen to use Syria as cultural designation to mean all the Western arch of the Fertile Crescent unless Lebanon or Palestine is specifically mentioned. I do so without any underlying political agenda.

Similarly vexing is the question of what we should call those Arabic-speakers of the region. I have used Arab as simple expedient but only Bedouin would have been called by that name for most of the Ottoman centuries. Reflecting identities that were current in the Ottoman period I have chosen *Rum* as a collective noun for Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox Christians and "Franks" for Western Europeans generally, and those who were Roman Catholics specifically. Those were the terms preferred by the inhabitants of the Ottoman Arab world. They also convey to the reader the ambiguities inherent in any potential ethnic identities in the period.