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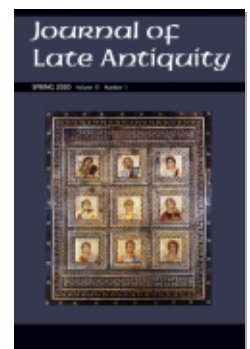
*The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society,
and Simple Believers* by Jack Tannous (review)

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(Review)

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declined earlier in Gaul than in the Upper Danubian provinces (43, 94–95) is also erroneous.

There are positive aspects, too. Walsh offers a useful compilation of data for late construction and repair of mithraea as well as valid, if hardly novel, observations on regional variations in the cult and large-scale coin deposition being a late antique innovation. He argues plausibly that population decline will have affected Mithraic communities in the north. Yet, numerous errors, omissions and heavily biased analysis mean that the book should be used with great caution.

Walsh wrote his work as Daesh reduced to rubble unique monuments and works of religious art at Palmyra, the Mosul museum and many other sites in the “Islamic State,” within a fraction of the time Christianity dominated the territories under investigation. Many late antique and early medieval Christian writers endorsed the destruction of pagan images and none, to my knowledge, openly opposed it, except where it was opportune to reuse monuments. Walsh’s attempt to downplay the phenomenon of religious extremism is not just unconvincing, but dangerous.

The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers

JACK TANNOUS

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
Pp. xiv + 672. ISBN 978-0-691-17909-4

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Given that the formation of confessional religious traditions with mass memberships is taken to be definitive for Late Antiquity, Tannous makes two important points. One is that the vast majority

of ordinary, everyday, non-elite believers were illiterate, agrarian, theologically unsophisticated, and poorly catechized. The second is that instead of a simple dichotomy between the learned and the unlearned there was a layering of knowledge among ordinary believers, both Christian and Muslim. The focus in this book is on simple, non-elite believers, confessional belonging and boundaries, and religious change mainly in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt from Late Antiquity into the Islamic period, how and when Christians became the majority population in the countryside, and the mechanics and pace of de-Christianization/Islamization after the Muslim conquest, when Christians remained the demographic majority until the eleventh century CE. It remains to be seen if the concept of simple believers would work for Christian Armenians or Ethiopians or for Jews or Zoroastrians.

Because of the urban and/or elite biases of the written sources Tannous resorts to indirect evidence, what he calls an “oblique approach,” such as anecdotal information, references to uncanonical practices, the fact that there were not enough priests to go around, especially in villages, and the use of as many types of sources as possible for corroboration. He makes very illuminating and creative use of Jacob of Edessa’s (d. 708) canonical *responsa* and the unpublished Syriac and Karshuni manuscripts of the *Life of Theodota of Amid*. The questions asked of Jacob give a sense of what was happening among ordinary Christians, and Tannous argues that they reflect actual behavior.

Confessional multiplicity resulting from the permanent fracturing of eastern Christianity into rival Churches was a major reality at the end of Late Antiquity after the Council of Chalcedon in 451

when there was fierce competition for the loyalties of simple, everyday Christians by religious elites. But Tannous minimizes the importance of religious doctrine in boundary creation, notes the importance of and confessional indifference toward sacraments, and recognizes the role of schools in creating rival confessional identities.

Tannous finds the same layering of knowledge and shallow grasp of details among ordinary early Muslims. Outside of the Arabian Peninsula Muslims were a ruling minority for several centuries, and Tannous suggests that in the period after the conquest it is likely that several hundred thousand Muslims lived among perhaps twenty or thirty million non-Muslims (398), so it is mistaken to call the non-Muslim population “minorities” for at least 500 years after the conquest. At first the Muslim community consisted of non-Muslim converts and their descendants, and the layering of knowledge and the lack of an orthodoxy among Muslims are key to understanding the religious dynamics in the Middle East following the Arab conquests. The earliest Christian-Muslim interactions occurred in a context of widespread ignorance and selective regard or disregard for the Qur’ān or the Prophet’s example.

There was no single reason for the conversion of Christians to Islam. Tannous enumerates material benefits, status and power, family or tribal connections, permissiveness, the delights of paradise, and compulsion as possible reasons and suggests a model of conversions occurring at a slow and incremental pace. For Tannous most conversions by Christians to Islam were by simple Christians into simple Muslims, and the conversion by simple Christians may not have meant

much of a change at all in their lived religious lives, while much Late Antique culture survived.

In what is an impressive, circum-spect, detailed, thorough, and careful exposition, there is one serious problem. Tannous claims that “Magians [Zoroastrians] were regarded by the Qur’ān as People of the Book” (295) with reference to Arthur Jeffery (*The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān* [Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938], 4) who inaccurately says that “the Qur’ān grants special privilege and protection to four communities as true believers.” On the preceding page Jeffery refers to “Šābians, who with the Jews, and Christians, and the Magians receive special recognition and favour” without calling them People of the Book. But even this cannot be supported by the Qur’ān. In those passages where the Qur’ān mentions the People of Scripture, it does not specify who they are. In Sūra 4:153 according to the context they are clearly Jews; in Sūra 4:171 according to the context they are clearly Christians; and in Sūra 5:65–66, 8 they are clearly Jews and Christians. But Sūras 2:62 and 5:69 say “those who believe and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians—whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does right—no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve” without identifying them as People of Scripture. The only place where Magians are mentioned in the Qur’ān is Sūra 22:17 that says “those who believe and who are Jews and the Sabaeans and the Christians and the Magians and the idolaters—Allah will decide between them on the Day of Resurrection.” The rest is interpretation, and it is the case that early Muslims treated Magians as though they were People of Scripture

(i.e., allowed them to pay tribute) based on early precedents.

Nevertheless, this is a groundbreaking work that offers original perspectives and revises Late Antique historiography in two important ways. First, this

is non-elitist, de-sectarianized, “trans-confessional” history that escapes the millet-oriented model of Church history. Second, it transcends the boundary between Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period to focus on continuity.