

**Emrah Sahin.** *Faithful Encounters: Authorities and American Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 264 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-5462-7.

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In his recent speech in Cairo, US secretary of state Mike Pompeo began by proudly identifying himself as an “evangelical Christian” and decreed that he was going to talk about a “truth,” one that was not “spoken much in this part of the world.” The United States, Pompeo argued, is “a force for good in the Middle East.”[1] In stating this, Pompeo joined a long line of evangelical Americans who came to the region harboring similar baseline beliefs. His earliest predecessors were missionaries who began arriving in the Ottoman lands during the 1820s. These missionaries believed that they had come to save a troubled region, one that was hindered by the dominance of Islam as well as the despotic and corrupt Ottoman government. Hence, to the nineteenth-century missionaries, the Ottoman Empire was a place where Americans could be a force for good, saving the souls of its inhabitants and educating its people in superior American ways. They saw themselves as a possible cure for “the sick man of Europe,” yet they presumed that the “man” was “sick” because of his own weakness, not because others were poisoning and occasionally bludgeoning him. This flawed understanding of the Ottoman Empire left little opening for these missionaries to gain any sort of valuable comprehension or appreciation of the region, its people, and its governance.

Such views about the “backwardness” of late Ottoman society infuse both the missionary archives and much of the subsequent twentieth-century English-language scholarship about missionaries in the empire.[2] Recent scholarship on this topic has improved because it has been undertaken by academics who have seen through the missionaries’ ideological blinders.[3] One issue has remained: most academics who study missionaries in the Ottoman lands have worked largely from missionary-produced archives both in the United States and abroad, thus limiting their ability to analyze the Ottoman perspective on this encounter. Scholars (like me) have relied on excellent works by academics like Selim Deringil and Benjamin Fortna, which have chapters about this interface but do not focus on it.[4] Academics have awaited an English-language work solely on missionaries in the Ottoman lands employing sources from the Ottoman archive, and this has finally arrived in the form of Emrah Şahin’s *Faithful Encounters: Authorities and American Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire*.

Şahin’s empirically rich book (with a striking cover) gives the Ottoman perspective on interactions between their government and the American missionaries. He focuses on the years between 1880 and 1908, though some examples come from outside of this window. Şahin shows

that the state's increasingly hands-on approach to missionaries was part of the late Ottoman centralization project, in which the Ottoman government tried to exert more control over activities within its borders and combat any centrifugal forces. In the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman government increasingly saw American missionaries as a group who needed to be watched, controlled, and curtailed. Because of this, the Ottoman state experimented with the various methods of control at their disposal in order to constrain the missionaries. Şahin's approach to his material is refreshing. As he rightly notes in his introduction, some scholars of missionaries in the Ottoman lands have praised them as bringers of modernity to the region, while others have painted them as extensions of imperialism. He chose to follow neither of these paths. Şahin also argues that the common dichotomies scholars have used to frame the relationship between Ottomans and missionaries (Muslim versus Christian/internal versus external) serve to reduce "the agents to obsolete and unreasoning parties" and "rob the subject of alternative stories" (p. 9). Şahin avoids these ideological confines and wisely builds his analysis directly from the evidence rather than from a preexisting framework or mind-set.

The main strength of *Faithful Encounters* lies in the many fascinating examples of Ottoman-missionary interactions that Şahin employs. Though he utilizes some missionary-produced material, the book is most groundbreaking when it uses evidence from the Ottoman archives. Luckily for Şahin, records for this era are plentiful (if sometimes incomplete) because of the state-building project that accelerated throughout the nineteenth century. In this time period, the Ottoman government improved its various forms of data collection and communications. These improvements positioned the Ottoman state to become more "interventionist" in order to maintain the empire's integrity, which meant, in the case of the missionaries, that the state became more active in controlling missionary undertakings (p. 22).

Şahin's organization of this evidence into four thematic chapters is apt for his topic. After the introduction, the second chapter discusses the expansion of American missionary institutions and the Ottoman push to exert more authority over them. The third focuses on Ottoman reactions to crimes against missionaries, while the fourth and fifth concern Ottomans' attempts to regulate institutions and printed materials (respectively). The organization is straightforward and its momentum results in the reader gaining a solid grounding in the "imperial perspective" by the book's end.

One of Şahin's main accomplishments in *Faithful Encounters* is to rebut missionary assertions about Ottoman policies in the era. American missionaries often complained (and some historians have accepted the legitimacy of these complaints) that Ottoman policy was anti-missionary, somewhat arbitrary, and selectively enforced. Şahin undermines these claims by showing that Ottoman decisions pertaining to the missionaries were rational, nuanced, and largely consistent, and that the Ottomans often went to great lengths to protect the missionaries, for which missionaries and historians have given them "less credit than they actually deserved" (p. 41). Şahin argues convincingly throughout the book that public order was the primary goal of the increasingly centralized Ottoman state. Examples of this abound. In a flurry of incidents recounted on pages 52 and 53, for example, Şahin recounts how the Ottomans dismissed one regional official in Harput for not keeping close enough track of local missionary activity, dismissed another in Sivas for beating up an evangelical priest, then promoted an official in Alexandretta for catching the murderer of another evangelical priest. Despite being leery of missionary endeavors, officials in Istanbul were more fearful of violence and disorder. Missionaries needed to be controlled but also protected. If regional officials failed at either of these tasks, punishment awaited.

Şahin also shows how the Ottoman government used laws and regulations to control the missionaries. Although American missionaries often assessed Ottoman laws as capricious and tedious, and historians have often rehashed this assessment, Şahin shows that these laws were indeed tedious, but purposefully so. In discussing regulations regarding missionary structures, printing presses, and textbooks, he shows how controversies over, for example, what constituted a school or the origin of a particular typeset for a printing press were actually an effective form of control over the missionaries. What missionaries saw as maddening over-regulation, the Ottoman government saw as an assertion of power. In many cases, once the Ottoman government showed that it was merely enforcing existing law, Americans and their diplomatic corps had little room to intervene. Conversely, once the missionaries had complied with the laws, they enhanced their legitimacy and legal standing within the Ottoman lands.

Importantly, Şahin's book helps to humanize the Ottoman bureaucracy. This is not to say that scholars doubt the humanity of bureaucrats, but the workings of the Ottoman bureaucracy's lower rungs often remain opaque in academic works. Scholars tend to focus on the regulations themselves rather than the people making and enforcing the regulations. In *Faithful Encounters*, the same people who often appear as unreasonable legalist automatons in much missionary writing seem like normal government officials simply trying to do their jobs. In 1903, for example, when Istanbul officials issued a directive calling for regional administrators to hire more agents to "screen foreign publications," Kayseri's governor, Mustafa Hilmi, replied that this was impossible because he had "inadequate funds" for such an undertaking and that few people in his region could read English (p. 109). He was successful in convincing his superiors that he could not accomplish this task and such responsibilities remained in the main population centers. Hilmi had re-

sponded as an agitated administrator given an impossible task by superiors who did not understand the conditions in his region. It was an ordinary bureaucratic moment but it is made remarkable by the fact that the missionary archives often do not provide such insight.

For all of the book's important contributions, Şahin could perhaps have done some elements differently. Those who believe that this is an important subject will feel that it deserved a longer treatment than can be accomplished in 137 pages of text. The book sometimes has the feel of a dissertation gone straight to print, which is likely the product of the current publish-or-perish atmosphere in academia. A couple more years of research and writing might have yielded a more definitive work. Some of Şahin's subsections eschew traditional academic narrative flow, without traditional introductions, for example. It was sometimes jarring to find analytical paragraphs that one might expect at the beginning or end of a subsection instead floating around somewhere in the middle. Some readers might find his occasional quirky framing devices, like the quote from a Cree Indian (p. 8) or a riddle (p. 133), distracting and unnecessary but perhaps we should not begrudge such experimentation in the rather staid genre that is academic writing. Finally, the reviewers of this manuscript should have tried to warn the author away from the use of semi-penetrable turns of phrase like "parochial prism of anathema" (p. 30). Erring on the side of clarity and accessibility is the wiser course.

These are but minor reservations about a work that contains much of value. Şahin's book paints the portrait of a reasonable but embattled government developing techniques to help its country survive. If left uncontrolled, the Ottomans believed that the missionaries were a threat to that survival. Much like Mike Pompeo, most missionaries arrived in the Ottoman lands believing that they knew what was best for its people. Large sections of the Pompeo's Cairo

speech were an open critique of Barak Obama's speech in the same city ten years earlier. Whatever the flaws of Obama's eventual Middle East policy, he at least had the ability to empathize with those who have found fault with American actions in the Middle East. Emrah Şahin's *Faithful Encounters* is an exercise in balance, understanding, and empathy. His refreshingly non-ideological approach allows his readers to develop an understanding of the subject on its own terms, which makes his arguments even more convincing. Secretary Pompeo either chooses to see the world through a Christian nationalist ideological lens, or, perhaps more frighteningly, is incapable of seeing it any other way. We should be thankful that scholars like Emrah Şahin choose balance over bombast.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael R. Pompeo, "A Force for Good: American Reinvigorated in the Middle East," speech at the American University of Cairo, January 10, 2019, US Department of State, transcript at <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/01/288410.htm>.

[2]. See, for example, John A. DeNovo, *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East 1900-1939* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1963); and Joseph Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy in the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810-1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971). It should be noted that there is much laudable scholarship in both of these works despite these shortcomings.

[3]. See, for example, Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Mehmet Ali Doğan and Heather J. Sharkey, eds., *American Missionaries and the Middle East: Foundational Encounters* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011).

[4]. Selim Deringil, *Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ot-*

*toman Empire, 1876-1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); and Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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