

Book Review

- Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. xiii + 296. Works Cited and Index. \$29.95 (cloth).

The specter of sectarianism has been evermore evoked during recent years, in characterizing—or, more to the point, caricaturing—a Middle East putatively scarred by resurging, age-old religious hatreds (to say less of other global regions, like South Asia, whose intercommunal conflicts are regularly framed in analogous terms). Feeding the portrayal are not merely outside observers purveying sensationalist scholarly, journalistic, and policy-making discourses. So, too, do such local actors as Syria’s Bashar al-Asad regime, cynically stoking and yet “demoniz[ing] sectarianism” (3), the better for holding itself forth as an indispensable, protective bulwark.

Ussama Makdisi has been at the vanguard of historical inquiry countering these deleterious myths. In *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (University of California Press, 2000), Makdisi revealed how sectarianism within Lebanon represents not “primordial” enmities, but rather the product of competing, nineteenth-century forces centering on European and Ottoman tactics of colonial control, together with nascent nationalisms. Now, in *Age of Coexistence*, Makdisi makes far-reaching conceptual and geographic additions to this foundation. The book details how late-Ottoman and early post-Ottoman history spawned the dual phenomena of sectarianism (*al-ta’ifiyya*) and antisectarianism (“*al-la ta’ifiyya*, or “nonsectarianism”) throughout the Arab world (136). Antisectarianism equates to an “ecumenical frame” through which emergent possibilities of religious and ethnic coexistence became envisioned between roughly the mid 1800s Ottoman Tanzimat reform era, and the 1950s–1960s heyday of anti-colonial Arab nationalism. Depending both on the specific moment within this century or so of historical time, as well as locale, participants in building the frame included Muslims, Christians, and Jews from various communities, offering competing ideas for a public consciousness capable of unifying across sectarian demarcations. The ecumenical frame has been under-recognized by scholars, and stands in need of renewal since Arab nationalist as well as Zionist projects turned variously ineffectual, exclusionary, and unjust, while predominating forms of Islamic activism have proved less than sympathetic to pluralism. Even so, Makdisi

poses the ecumenical frame as a tradition still offering emancipatory hope amidst today's "existential crisis" within the Arab world (218).

The theoretical underpinnings of Makdisi's argument underscore how the book is productively situated amidst broader debates concerning the historical assemblage of "religious" and "secular" identities. Telling is Makdisi's indebtedness to, but perceptive critique of Talal Asad's influential deconstruction—in texts like *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003)—of the artificial, modern binary between religion and secularity, each of these two concepts having become deployed as implements of political power. As Makdisi asserts in parrying Asad, together with others like Saba Mahmood, "secular Arab nationalism" did not simply represent the neo-colonial superimposition "of a condescending Western, Christian-derived secularism" (15). Instead, post-Ottoman endeavors like the development of Lebanon's multi-communal constitution, the fraught attempt under Faysal's Hashemite monarchy at subsuming parochial identities beneath the mantle of Iraqi nationalism, and Syria's nascent Baath Party were attempts to articulate a secular vision within which to encompass "a diverse religious landscape" (160). Similarly, by invoking "[t]he Greek word *oikoumenē*, from which the term "ecumenical" derives, mean[ing] the whole of the inhabited earth" (7), Makdisi brings to mind Marshall Hodgson's world-historical understanding of "diverse "Islamicate" culture" as elaborated in Hodgson's landmark work, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1974). Equally brought to bear by the term is "cooperation among . . . separate Christian denominations in the pursuit of a common ideal, the universal church" (7).

The chronology begins around the seventeenth-century zenith of Ottoman territorial power, when the vast Sunni empire extended classical Islamic *dhimmi* legal protection, but assuredly not equality, to its myriad Christian and Jewish subjects. European imperial encroachment on the Ottomans, comprising Christian missionaries as well as military campaigns, economic capitulations, and political interference, reached a turning point in the 1820s Greek war of independence. The resulting proliferation of European-backed, "Balkan Christian nationalism" helped prompt the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) (48). Singularly significant is the 1856 edict whose ostensible elimination of religious discrimination within the Empire sought to forestall the competing British, French, and Russian interventionism on behalf of differing Christian denominations that had just acted to bring about the Crimean War. However, such attempted pacification proved "the crucible of sectarian violence," with Syria and Lebanon as prime sites for intercommunal bloodletting sparked under conditions where "a Tanzimat language of non-discrimination" collided with "a historical reality of discrimination" (44–74). Here, and elsewhere, Makdisi raises one of the few weaker links in the book, namely, a drawing of comparisons to the disingenuousness

of claimed racial equality in other global locales like the United States. While the point is assuredly well-taken, it tends to read as diversionary from a thesis whose ramifications for the broader world are manifest.

The heart of Makdisi's account lies in the poignant irony that the "all-out [sectarian] war" erupting by 1860 provided the impetus for a "new ecumenical ethos that began to emerge in the Mashriq [i.e., "the region that today encompasses Lebanon, Syria, the Occupied Palestinian territories, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq"]" (3, 55, 76). At this historical juncture, a pivotal regional distinction is drawn between the Mashriq, and "[t]he Balkans and parts of Anatolia," where hostility among such ethnicities as "Turks, Kurds, Greeks, and Armenians" paved the way for the abrogation of the Tanzimat reforms, and outright genocide (75–110). Throughout the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), and after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution's "brief window of optimism" (82) closed during the Italo-Turkish, Balkan, and First World Wars, Ottoman-initiated or abetted violence against suspected challengers to Istanbul's authority throughout the northern Empire contrasted with burgeoning cosmopolitanism to the south. Within the Mashriq, the "*nahda*, or "renaissance," of Arabic thought" (20) that was fostered by vibrant literary and educational growth, as well as by migrations both inside the region, and between the eastern Mediterranean and the Western world, informed a complex, contradictory milieu. Therein, Muslims and non-Muslims sought coexistence under "the shadow of . . . [a] late Ottoman state" (96) fighting to retain its sovereignty.

When Ottoman sovereignty disintegrated following World War One, it would now be under the shadow of British and French domination that the ecumenical frame entered into a new era of tensions between colonial ambitions, and local strivings for forms of independence that were inclusive of communal difference. On the one hand, League of Nations Mandate-holding "European colonial powers solemnly vowed to protect religious freedoms and uphold religious diversity in the Arab world" (115). At the same time, colonial strategies of "divide and rule" (118) were everywhere evident, leaving still-festering wounds in places like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine.

Against this backdrop, anticolonial nationalists faced the quandary of "how to relate religion to national affiliation in what were deeply multireligious societies" (121). Makdisi presents two figures—the Francophile Lebanese Christian Michel Chiha, and the "secular Ottoman" (128) turned Arab nationalist Syrian Sati' al-Husri—as exemplars of contending approaches. The former advocated "a formal communal power-sharing formula" (128) focusing on the division of authority among Sunnis, Shi'a, and Maronite Christians, in a perilous balance disproportionately slanted toward the European-oriented Maronites, while relatively disadvantaging further communities like the Druze. By contrast, Husri's stance sought an "antisectionarian nationalism" (147), nonetheless hindered by the perception that it effectively favored Sunni Arabs over others like Shi'a, Christians, and Kurds.

The matter of “Arab and Jew in Palestine” proved the irredeemable sectarianism that “[broke] the ecumenical frame” (163–201). The book’s final chapter recounts how an interpolated, British-backed European nationalist movement overwhelmed Palestinian attempts at galvanizing Muslim-Christian cooperation in resistance to Zionism, relegating Palestinians to a minority within their own land. “The binational formula for Palestine” articulated during the 1940s by idealistic Jewish critics like Martin Buber and Judah Magnes (one could add Hannah Arendt, whom Makdisi does not mention) held forth the glimmer of “a Zionist ecumenical frame;” however, “the *nakba*, or “the catastrophe” of Palestinian dispossession was not to be forestalled (190–194).

Makdisi’s book is a major achievement in the rereading of history underlying contemporary “sectarianism” within the Middle East. From this instructor’s vantage point, much has been unearthed that I, and my students, did not know with respect to the full relationship between religion and the making of the modern Middle East—the topic of a joint, History/Religion, Culture and Society course at the University of Victoria. The ongoing critique of “sectarianism” is also valuable for the teaching of my global politics and religion course. While the nuanced theoretical structure and historical detail in *Age of Existence* make it most appropriate for assigning to upper-level undergraduate classes, any teachers of relevant world history, and for that matter readers concerned with the book’s implications for global life, would find it illuminating. This is historical analysis whose reframing of the past genuinely helps to offer possibilities for imagining future forms of coexistence.

Andrew M. Wender is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Departments of Political Science and History, and Director of the Religion, Culture and Society Program, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada. He may be reached at amwender@uvic.ca.