

MARIA CHIARA RIOLI, *A Liminal Church: Refugees, Conversions and the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem, 1946–1956* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). Pp. 401. \$198.00 cloth, \$150.00 e-book. ISBN 9789004423725.

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Popular histories that refer to Palestine/Israel as the “Holy Land,” or to Jerusalem as the “Holy City,” all too often utterly fail to understand why religion has played such a central role in the history of the region: not because of some special fervor of belief among its inhabitants, but (at least partly) because of the outsized reach of religious institutions in its physical spaces. In *A Liminal Church*, Maria Chiara Rioli has produced a detailed and useful account of the specifics of one such institutional religious presence in Jerusalem and its surrounds: the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem during the crucial years of the 1948 war and its aftermath.

In its institutional focus on the patriarchate and diocese, Rioli’s book reiterates a number of salient truths that have been too often forgotten in the historiography of the 1948 war and of Palestine/Israel more generally. Above all, she reminds us that membership in communal religious institutions organized people’s relationships with their work, neighborhoods, and local governments, creating practical connections that were far more important than dogmatic or theological commitments. Christian and Muslim Palestinians alike operated within a simultaneous and overlapping network of communal, political, and regional ties in which religious affiliation was continually relevant but not necessarily determinative. Further, the religious institutions with which many Palestinians were affiliated, particularly Christians, represented the interests of major international diplomatic powers as well as (and often far more than) those of their local Arab faithful; and in the constant struggle between these institutions’

regional and global political ambitions and the interests of their local memberships, political ambition often won out. Further, “humanitarian” aid to Palestine/Israel was often channeled through international religious organizations with their own sets of interests, even after the formation of internationalist bodies like the United Nations. Tracing the institutional history of an organization like the Latin Diocese thus places a different set of actors front and center in the history of the 1948 war, and offers some interesting and surprising additions to the all-important story of the *Nakba*.

To start, Rioli’s analysis – based mainly on archival research in ecclesiastical archives, including those of the Latin Patriarchate, the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, and a number of smaller monasteries and convents in Jerusalem, as well as diaspora-focused archives elsewhere like those of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association – emphasizes from the beginning the fundamental modernity and the highly politicized nature of the patriarchate and the diocese. The book begins by tracing how the Vatican reestablished the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem after a long period of abeyance in 1847 – a moment of intensified British, French, and Russian imperial interests in the Ottoman Mashriq. Its inauguration marked the onset of a new imperial politics in the Middle East: the determination of the Holy See to “liberate” Eastern Catholics from Muslim Ottoman subjection, and to do so as part of a crusade to “counteract French influence” (27).

It is a telling beginning for a history that is far more political than religious. Over the course of the decade encompassing the 1948 war, the expulsion of the Palestinians, and the Suez Crisis, Rioli describes a Latin patriarchate that was above all a political institution: one with its own competing internal interests, networks of diplomatic relationships, and geopolitical goals both local and global. The war itself, from this institutional perspective, was characterized not only by the expulsion of much of the community but also the physical division of the old patriarchate among three newly defined territories: Israel, Jordan, and Egypt. Without an active patriarch since the death of Barlassina in 1947, the community often felt abandoned by a Vatican unsure how far to commit to its Palestinian faithful in the aftermath of the war. When the pope finally elevated former custos Alberto Gori to the position two years later, engagement with the politics of the conflict was unavoidable: the most immediate and basic task of the church was to offer support, succor, and advocacy for the refugees who constituted most of the patriarchate’s faithful. The famous scholar of Islam Louis

Massignon, among many others, understood that in such a moment there could be no separation between questions of pastoral care and questions of political rights. As Rioli puts it, Massignon tried to press the case for a “convergence between the international rights of refugees and the Abrahamic model regarding the care of guests and strangers . . . [thus] opening the way to a new concept of a binational, Arab-Jewish state” (165). It was a vision the church would be unable to sustain.

Moreover, with the advent of a formally Jewish State of Israel and the governance of the West Bank and Gaza falling under evolving (and, it turned out, temporary) forms of postcolonial authority, Rioli traces how the patriarchate had to clarify its own position within each of the three national bodies under which it now found itself. The various roles the church had played—in education, public worship, land and property stewardship, and personal status law—now had to be renegotiated within three different, uncertain, and constantly shifting post-1948 political spheres. The tortured negotiations over the position of Jewish converts to Catholicism in the new Israeli state stand in the book as symbolic, though in no way completely representative, of the difficult reinvention of these institutional relationships in a new national context. Equally trying was the long process of reestablishing the relationship “between Rome and Jerusalem” in this new context, particularly as the church became an important resource for refugee aid and sometimes a political advocate for its members’ right of return.

All these exchanges took place, as Rioli perceptively remarks, in an atmosphere where such “forms of *politicization of the religious* were implicated in a context marked by various stratifications of the *sacralization of the political*” (288). In other words, the church was not the only institution experiencing a melding of the political and the religious; the national state, the ever-growing apparatus of “humanitarian” aid, and the machines of internationalism in the form of the United Nations were all subject to the same forces in reverse. By the time of the Suez Crisis and the run-up to the 1967 war, it was becoming clear that the specifically Christian worldview of the United States—now replacing Britain and France as superpower-in-chief over the Middle East—would define and delimit church operations in the “Holy Land” in new ways.

Rioli’s book is long and detailed, with a great deal of institutional narrative that will seem opaque and even difficult to readers unfamiliar with ecclesiastical histories. But in its use of previously unplumbed archives, its detailed reconstruction of the histories of Palestine’s Catholic refugees during and after 1948, and

above all its interpretation of the Latin Church as an essentially political actor, *A Liminal Church* is a genuinely important addition to our understanding of Palestine and Israel in the years after 1948. The book's inclusion of dozens of archival photos of the community over the course of this tumultuous decade – one of the most tangible pleasures of this work – is an indication of Rioli's laudable commitment to the idea that human lives operate essentially on a quotidian plane in which the political and the religious remain essentially inextricable.