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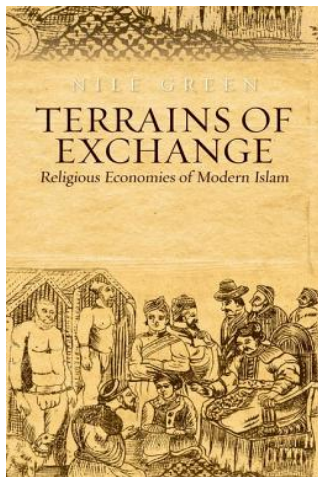
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## MISSIONARIES AND SUFI MASTERS: ISLAM AND THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

MARCH 28, 2017

### PHILIPPE BORNET ON NILE GREEN'S *TERRAINS OF EXCHANGE*



Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 288 pp., \$37.50



What is the common denominator between distinguished Oxbridge Orientalists, a German Christian missionary active on the shores of the Caspian Sea, a Sufi master based in Aurangabad, a mentally-ill Muslim Sepoy perceived as a holy man, and the founder of the first purpose-built mosque in Detroit? At first sight, not much, except that they are all connected to the subject of religion in one way or the other. In *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam* Nile Green tells us how and why. They are all actors in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century global history of religious exchange.

Pursuing the discussion initiated in his earlier book, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915*, Green analyzes various, idiosyncratic, forms of religion (especially Islam) produced in contexts

characterized by high religious heterogeneity and competition (especially Iran and India). The words “exchange” and “economies” in the title allude to economical and rational choice theories applied to the study of religion—this is of course nothing new, with Stark and Bainbridge’s *A Theory of Religion* having already reached the venerable age of thirty. The application of this framework, however, is “soft,” and consists in great part in renaming religious organizations as “firms,” missionary stations as “franchises,” religious activists as “entrepreneurs” and their targets as “customers.” This perspective works largely as a lens that contributes to “de-familiarize readers from social entities (‘Islam,’ ‘Christianity’) and actors (‘Muslims,’ ‘Christians’) they assume they already know.” Before addressing a few broader issues related to the project, it is necessary to survey the various “micro-stories” that are woven together in the book and organized into three different parts.

In the first part, “Missionary Catalysts, Muslim Responses,” Green explores the development of “Evangelical orientalism” and its entanglement with the imperial

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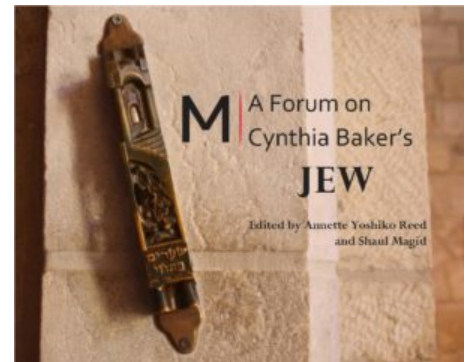
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project in Oxford and Cambridge, highlighting the paradox that Bible translations needed expert linguists and help was frequently sought from non-Christian native speakers. Working on the often overlooked spot that Mohammed Tavakoli Targhi termed “orientalism’s genesis amnesia” (meaning the unacknowledged role of non-Western scholars in the production of translations or studies about “oriental” cultures and literatures), Green examines lesser-known actors who cooperated with Western scholars and shows how they redirected the opportunities offered to them in order to pursue their own agendas. A first example is that of the Iranian Mirza Salih Shirazi, who, while in London in 1815, aided Cambridge theology professors and a local printer to produce a Persian Psalter and New Testament. He then went back to Iran where he employed the technologies learned in London for printing non-Christian Arabic and Persian texts. The case of Henry Martyn and his Iranian collaborators who worked on Arabic and Urdu translations of the New Testament presents a similar pattern. Several of these Iranian scholars would soon “turn” against their former employer, publishing anti-Anglican pamphlets. For Green, this is a clear instance of the “catalytic and generative exchanges” by which “Christian competition and technology generated Muslim innovation.” A third example takes place in the Russian Empire, with Scottish and German missionaries based in Astrakhan (on the Caspian Sea) and Shusha (Caucasus), respectively. This gives Green the opportunity to revisit the career of Karl Gottlieb Pfander, first an employee of the Basel Mission and later of the Church Missionary Society. Pfander heavily relied on the help of an Armenian Christian, Mirza Farukh Amirkhanz, who provided him with a Persian translation of a polemical Christian work. Pfander then presented this work as his own and built his fame on it. The chapter concludes on a convincing note about the origins of Baha’ism and Sayyid ‘Ali’s (the Bab) *Kitab al-Bayan* (1847), as a “testament to Iran’s new terrains of exchange.”

In the second part, Green turns to “entrepreneurs” who were not subaltern actors redirecting opportunities, but who managed to develop their own agenda, attracting their own “clientele.” Green transports his readers to Aurangabad, where he analyzes the relations between a British missionary (Henry Smith, arrived in 1902), a local Sufi master (Mu’inullah Shah, arrived in 1916), and mill-owners financially supporting the activities of the Sufi master. Green pays particular attention to practices introduced by Mu’inullah (such as a weekly meeting held on Sundays) that represented a direct competition to Smith’s activities. Here again, missionary presence and trade with global partners—itsself made possible by the opening of a rail link to Bombay—are presented as decisive and entangled factors of the Sufi master’s success. Green next turns his attention to the reception of “religious products,” analyzing the unlikely encounter between a rich Hindu minister of Hyderabad state (Kishan Parshad) and a Muslim soldier in the service of the British army who had attained the status of a holy man among his fellow soldiers. Reading Kishan Parshad’s notes about his “pilgrimage” from Hyderabad to Nagpur, Green emphasizes that the encounter reflects a fluidity between Hinduism and Islam and that this example of “religious cosmopolitanism” contrasts with “boundary-marking congregations of other religious entrepreneurs.” Through this example, Green argues that “it is not necessary to identify or to be identified as a Muslim in order to produce or reshape Islam,” given that “agency is more important than identity.”

Green also explores the exportation of religious goods and persons to the USA and Japan. He discusses the creation of the Detroit mosque in 1921 and the activities carried out there by Muhammad Sadiq, preaching Ahmadi Islam and

attracting a large African-American audience. Instead of considering Sadiq in his American setting exclusively (as has often been the case), Green presents him in continuity with Indian missionaries of the Ahmadiyya movement and with proselytizing techniques experimented on in Punjab, India—practices which owed much to the influence of Christian evangelical missionaries in India. The main source is a little-studied Urdu memoir, *Lata'if-e Sadeq*, in which Muhammad Sadiq describes his own activities in the Midwest in the style of a travelogue, complete with stories of miracles and successful challenges won against Christian interlocutors. Green offers lastly a micro-study of Japan's first purpose-built mosque, opened in Kobe in 1935. Relying on local newspapers (in Japanese) and the records of the Mosque Committee, Green underlines the role of Japanese commercial ports and the international trade diaspora in the construction of global religious connections, and develops their consequences on the local religious landscape. Managing to make sense of extremely diverse sets of data, Green not only brings together recent historiographical debates in the study of orientalism and global history, but also opens perspectives for the study of religions.

Since many of the book's examples involve colonial territories characterized by highly asymmetrical distributions of power, one issue concerns the junction between colonial history and global history. Green parts ways with Talal Asad's Foucauldian conception of "religion" as a "discursive tradition," to conceive it rather as an "internally competitive field of social actors and organizations." With this definition at hand, Green can speak about Europeans as "catalysts" rather than "controllers of exchange" and about "indigenous interest groups" as "protecting existing influence or gaining new authority" through religion, instead of being submitted to external influences. While this could be understood as downplaying unequal access to the new media and financial and political resources, Green certainly does not negate the fact that actors were often forced into specific kinds of interaction. The point is that in religious and scholarly matters, the outcome of these interactions was not as predictable as one might assume. In that sense, the various spaces explored in the book can be described as metamorphic zones with effects for all the participants. Here, Green aligns with scholars who have revisited postcolonial studies to recast orientalism in a more global and dynamic framework: it is not only about deconstructing the concept of binary relations between the "Orient" and the "West," the ruler and the ruled, but also about recovering the agency of local players and analyzing how knowledge and culture circulated. This is the approach favored by a new generation of South Asianist historians, such as [Norbert Peabody](#), [Michael S. Dodson](#), or [Harald Fischer-Tiné](#).

Following a path similar to the one taken by C. A. Bayly in *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, the book embraces a truly transnational perspective, characterized by interactions with consequences for both metropolises and peripheries. This is particularly evident in the attention paid to relatively "marginal spaces," such as Shiraz, Astrakhan, Shushan, Lucknow, Aurangabad or Detroit—a focus contrasting with more usual centers of orientalist production, such as London or Paris. As already mentioned, this global scope is approached through particular cases, staying away from the generalizing tendency of "world history" and displaying a certain proximity with historians of the *microstoria* school that developed in Italy. One can think about Carlo Ginzburg and his work on the life of an Italian mill-worker, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, or about Edoardo Grendi's work on the city of Genoa's social history—already a kind of "terrain of exchanges" in itself. For Green, as for those



historians, one important goal is to reconstruct the history of non-elitist actors. They work with a highly eclectic set of sources and read them “against the grain”—ranging, in the present book, from an inscribed calico cloth, to missionary papers and Japanese newspapers.

Perhaps a question left for further research is that of gender: is it possible to work on female figures who operated in similar “terrains of exchange”? What kind of alternative archives can be used to reconstruct that history? Were women competing with male “entrepreneurs” and targeting the same “customers”? Or did they develop alternative strategies, addressing separate, gendered, religious marketplaces? In any case, Green’s use of unusual sources makes one realize how little we know about the likes of the selected actors and how efficient an analysis of micro-histories can be for delineating global patterns.

As to the perspectives opened for the study of religions, at least three important points ought to be mentioned: first, Green’s emphasis on the religious dimensions of orientalism is an important observation that provokes a reevaluation of narratives about the globalization, not only of Islam, but of various issues that are framed in terms of religion in the current of the nineteenth century. It is evident that orientalist projects (including the work of scholars of religion) cannot be disentangled from the activity of various actors who had religion-driven agendas, such as Christian evangelical missionaries and charismatic figures of other traditions. This recognition opens perspectives for investigating the construction of categories about religion as part of global processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if not before.

A second related point is the connection between religion and media which appears throughout the book. The role of print and contemporary medias (telegraph, photography), as well as of modern means of transportation (boat, train), in the creation of new religious forms can hardly be overemphasized. There is ample material here for innovative studies, for example those dealing with the impact of print, trains, or telegraph on religion. In particular, an aspect of the book that deserves further exploration is that of the circulation of images (especially photography), not as merely illustrating textual material, but as players in the religious exchanges. In any case, focusing on the effects of tools, techniques, and products introduced by Christian firms (a.k.a. evangelical missions), Green develops a balanced account of missionary institutions: a rare quality in a field where studies tend to oscillate between more or less overt apology and radical criticism.

A third stimulating aspect for the study of religions is the focus on individual actors and processes of change: this echoes recent studies about “lived religion”—a concept popularized by the American sociologist **Meredith McGuire**—to help think about local and changing forms of religion as appropriated by individuals. This microscopic view of religious phenomena is an antidote to the tendency to think about religions in terms of reified entities (“Islam,” “Christianity,” “Hinduism”), and the internal (“emic”) conceptualization of religious institutions which tend to describe themselves as homogenous, unchanging, and eternal.

The book invites further thought and research on the question of whether or not it is accurate to speak about “Christian missionary catalysts” and “Muslim responses” in all cases, and the extent to which other “internal” factors were instrumental in the development of “terrains of exchange.” This would imply a

focus on the “pre-evangelical” phase of religious exchanges in South Asia—a phase that is mentioned in some examples of encounters between Muslim and Hindu devotees at particular shrines, or in Dara Shikoh’s “concordist” views as a remote influence on Kishan Parshad, but not in others. In the same vein, one could ask about the relations between religion and technology in a more precise way: what does, for example, make a printing press “Christian” or “Muslim”? Is it because of the religious affiliation of its owners or because of the books printed on it? Would it be more accurate to use other descriptive categories (linguistic: Persian, Arabic)? Working on this issue would require a case-by-case evaluation and perhaps even quantitative data to get a better picture of the history of printing in Asian contexts—a field which requires further development.

Finally, one might wonder about the specificity of Islam in these global religious exchanges. Similar stories of “competitive religious marketplaces” can be told about Buddhism in colonial Sri Lanka (e.g., the famous debates between Buddhist monks and Christian missionaries in the second part of the nineteenth century), about the encounters between different strands of Christianity and Hinduism in Bengal (e.g., Ram Mohan Roy and his relations with Baptist missionaries), about relations between Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Ārya Samāj in Punjab (e.g., the development of the Singh Sabha), and so on. This is certainly not a criticism—since a book cannot cover everything—but an enticement for future collaborative research with connections outside of the Christian-Muslim framework. In fact, more works like the present book are needed to document the multiplicity of Islams and to focus on the hybrid histories of religious traditions. This may be the best response historians can give to attempts to reify religious identities based on imagined “greater” and “purer” pasts that have a renewed influence today.

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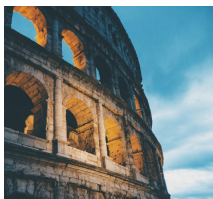
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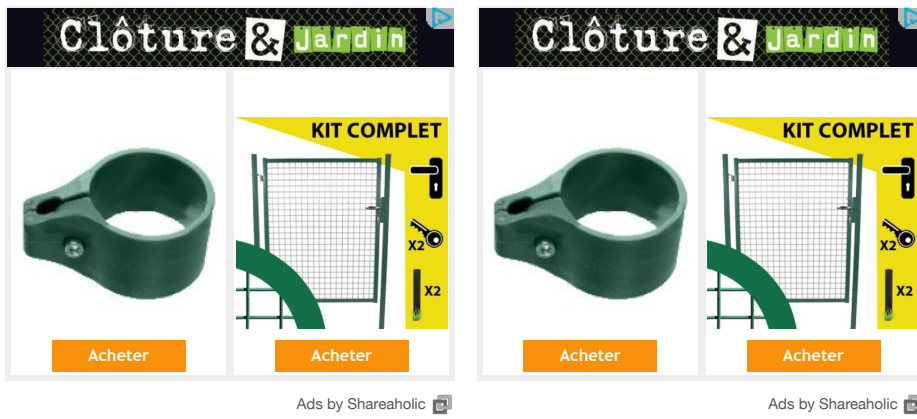
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