

## REVIEW

*German religious women in late Ottoman Beirut: competing missions*, by Julia Hauser. Studies in Christian Mission 45. Leiden: Brill, 2015. Pp. x + 391. Hardback €149.00, ISBN: 978-90-04-28249-0.

Women have long been overlooked or marginalized as actors in global historical studies, even though they have been central agents in processes of global transformations for centuries. In the age of empire, as steamships and railways allowed more and more people to cross geographical boundaries, the global mobility of women increased dramatically. This new mobility contributed significantly to the global reconfiguration of gender relations, notions of femininity and masculinity, and sexual morals, tastes, and aesthetics.

Over the last decade or so, more and more scholars have turned to look at female actors in global history, exploring, for example, the experiences of women within the expanding imperial world, the subject of Linda Colley's *The ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (2007); the global displacement suffered by female slaves, as studied by Jean Hébrard and Rebecca Scott in the *Freedom papers* (2012); and the role of bourgeois and aristocratic women in the world of diplomacy, examined in Helen McCarthy's *Women of the world* (2014).

An important global arena for women was the missionary enterprise. From the middle of the nineteenth century, female religious organizations, such as missionary schools, orphanages, and convents, operated increasingly on a global scale. The missionary project allowed pious women, imbued with the desire to spread their faith, to break out of the narrow confines of their European home countries and to move out into the world, transgressing boundaries both socially and geographically. And their work had a far-reaching influence on gender relations around the world.

It is this world that Julia Hauser's masterful study, *German religious women in late Ottoman Beirut*, explores. Drawing on sources in German, French, English, and Arabic, it looks at the activities of the deaconesses of the Kaiserswerther Diakonie in Beirut between the 1860s and 1918. Founded in 1836 by the Prussian pastor Theodor Fliedner, a major figure of the nineteenth-century Protestant religious revival, the Kaiserswerther Diakonie ran hospitals, schools, and orphanages, employing single women both at home and abroad. The deaconesses, committed to a life of obedience, poverty, and chastity, considered their work in nursing and education as a means to uphold and spread the Christian faith. Around the middle of century, they established themselves across the Ottoman empire, most importantly in Jerusalem, central to their mission to liberate the Holy Land from Islam, and in Beirut, a regional centre of Christianity. In Beirut, they ran a boarding and day school for the daughters of European families and local bourgeois elites, as well as an orphanage for girls from poorer families. Their educational enterprise was, unlike their missionary work, successful overall.

Western education for women was in great demand among the expanding middle classes in the Ottoman empire at that time, particularly among those in metropolitan centres with close connections to Europe, and the deaconesses benefited from this trend. Their mission competed with numerous other modern schools established around the same time by Catholic and Protestant institutions, Jewish organizations, and Muslim groups, turning Beirut into a 'city of schools'.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first two establish the context of the story – discussing the religious revivals in Europe and the rise of missionary activities in the Ottoman empire – and look at the beginnings of the deaconesses' activities in the Middle East. The remaining six chapters offer closer insights into the global microcosmoses of the women. They show that their encounters on the ground constituted highly complex processes of negotiations and renegotiations, adaptations and rejections, acculturations and conflicts. In everyday life, the women

showed remarkable flexibility when dealing with their clients, the wider local population and state authorities, and their superiors in Prussia. Indeed, the study gives considerable agency to the local population, demonstrating that the relationship was by no means a one-sided encounter between passive clients and dominant deaconesses. It shows that the deaconesses were unable to simply transfer their own religious culture to their new environment; instead, the relationship constituted a dynamic string of negotiations shaped by both sides.

The missionary field gave these Prussian women, considered moral beacons of society, the opportunity to become involved in the global arena. Their work in the Ottoman empire was informed by a specific Christian understanding of gender in the 'Islamic world', which considered Middle Eastern women to be oppressed and their family life degenerate. Only Christianity could 'uplift' them out of their misery, and this would then have a 'civilizing' impact on their societies in general. After all, women, as the mothers of future generations, were seen as vital agents of change in their societies.

The book shows that the missionary education of local women, which increased female literacy and their command of foreign languages, opened up new employment opportunities for them. Moreover, the encounters between the pious Prussians and the local population contributed to the emergence of new local discourses on gender, ranging from the notion of separate spheres to the idea of domesticity as a female domain, which had influences across social and religious milieus. These transformations did not always have an emancipatory effect, of course. The German women's Protestant notions of gender were hardly based on equality, and the missionary pursuit created new gender hierarchies. Their ideal of domesticity, for example, radically circumscribed female agency. Moreover, some women educated at the missionary school experienced cultural alienation in their own communities. The deaconesses, driven by religious zeal, showed little interest in the problems that their work generated for their clients.

Overall, Hauser's book also makes an important contribution to our more general understanding of the Christian missionary project in global history. In 1897, Louise Kayser, head of the Beirut boarding school, described the deaconesses' institution as an 'island surrounded by the crashing waves of the ocean' (p. 1). This notion of missions as an isolated island surrounded by wilderness, so common among contemporary missionaries, has informed the studies of many scholars who have worked on missionary history in the past. Hauser convincingly shows that this 'island metaphor' is grossly misleading, as missionaries were in fact closely entangled not only with their local environments but also with their countries of origin and international religious institutions. 'Missions, or so may be concluded, were far from being islands', she writes – quite the opposite: 'They were very much part of the ocean' (p. 325).

A model study of global microhistory, *German religious women in late Ottoman Beirut* moves elegantly between various spaces, showing that the protagonists were part of different spheres, local, imperial, and global. It makes a crucial contribution not only to missionary history but also to the growing field of global gender history.

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