

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

A RESPONSE TO BRUCE MASTERS' REVIEW OF *MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN LATE OTTOMAN PALESTINE: WHERE NATIONALISM AND RELIGION INTERSECT* (*IJMES* 49 [2017]: 191–93)

ERIK E. FREAS

doi:[10.1017/S0020743817001179](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743817001179)

The following is written with a dual purpose: to respond to Bruce Masters' review of my recently published monograph, *Muslim-Christian Relations in Late-Ottoman Palestine*; but more importantly, to suggest that it might be time that Middle East historians reevaluate the manner of our assessment of the value and proper use of “Western” (i.e., nonindigenous) sources in researching and writing about the region's history.

In his review, Masters asserts that I rely entirely on Western sources, and thus perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes of the Middle East. Putting aside for a moment that it would be fairer to contend that I *overrely* on Western sources (inasmuch as I do make use of indigenous sources as well), at no point does Masters point to any specific example of Orientalism, either by way of stereotyping or misrepresenting Muslim–Christian relations in 19th-century Palestine. Rather it seems that the charge of Orientalism is levied solely based on my supposed over-reliance on nonindigenous sources, particularly given that Masters appears to mostly concur with the broader contours of my book, even if omitting much of the nuance. (I'm not sure, for instance, that I ever “hint” that differing conceptions of Arab national identity between Christian and Muslim Arabs reflected a perception that Arab nationalism was little more than a “temporary expediency” for asserting the political status of Arabs within the Ottoman Empire; rather I suggest that, in light of what were more immediate political concerns, differences in respective conceptions were often ignored or obfuscated.) Indeed, he even recommends it for the general reader and undergraduate students, a recommendation perhaps not entirely intended as a compliment given his criticism of my sourcing, though nonetheless reflective of my intention that it should provide an overview comprehensible to the layman of inter-religious relations in the region during the period in question.

The particulars of Masters' review of my book aside, there is the broader concern noted above: namely, that we—meaning historians of the Middle East—have seemingly arrived at a point where *the* determinative measure of scholarly credibility has too often been to what extent one's work relies on indigenous sources. This is hardly to argue against their use. That indigenous sources are relevant to any particular history is self-evident, and I whole-heartedly agree that where Middle East scholarship is concerned, the problem of Western bias—as outlined by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*—has proven uniquely relevant. However, the problem of Orientalist discourse has never been strictly a measure of nonindigenous versus indigenous sources. Indeed, a great deal of Orientalist scholarship has relied quite heavily on the latter.

© Cambridge University Press 2018 0020-7438/18

In this vein, we might note as well that, where histories of regions other than the Middle East are concerned, not only have nonindigenous sources been not so readily disparaged, they have in fact frequently been viewed as having inherent value. The case of de Tocqueville vis-à-vis early American history most famously comes to mind, but I would venture to say that a careful reading of the Egyptian intellectual Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi would have much to offer the historian of early 19th-century France.

The real issue is not whether a source is indigenous or not, but rather the manner in which a historian uses it. More specifically, how a historian contextualizes it, not only vis-à-vis anticipated biases and subjectivities, but also with regard to other source types, whether by making direct use of them, or by accounting for the findings of those scholars who did. By way of example, and in light of Masters’s criticism, is a source type pertinent to the subject matter of my book—the *sijillāt*, or Islamic Court records. That the *sijillāt* are relevant to the topic of Muslim–Christian relations in 19th-century Palestine is indisputable, and it is correct, as Masters notes in his review, that I did not make direct use of them. I outline several reasons for this in the introduction to my book. Additionally, and more importantly, while I did not directly access them, I did make extensive use of and incorporate into my discussion the scholarship of historians who did—such individuals as Beshara Doumani and Mahmoud Yazbak—in a way I believe properly integrated their findings with my own to produce a narrative reflective in significant measure of both. Of course, any scholar, including Masters, is free to dispute whether I actually achieved an appropriate balance in this regard; it is quite another thing, however, to imply that I simply ignored the *sijillāt* altogether.

I would conclude by underscoring a simple reality: no single historian can account for all source types. Ultimately, we historians have to make choices—more often than we might like, on the basis of what resources are realistically available time-wise and financially—and then wrestle with respective subjectivities and biases (problems inherent in all sources, regardless of their point of origin) while attempting to tease from them what information we can, even while hopefully contextualizing the resulting work within the broader scholarship of the related history. Of course, the discipline of history is, in the end, a collective enterprise, and indeed, I greatly look forward to what other scholars might come up with utilizing source types I did not in addressing the argument I outline in my own book.