

Revolutionary Guard” through multimedia campaigns, many of which featured Soleimani (p. 109). According to Bajoghli, due to this media campaign Soleimani was constructed as a national hero and came to be adored not only by supporters of the regime, but also “those who view themselves as critical of the regime” (p. 110). The massive public outpouring of grief upon his assassination in 2020 is perhaps not surprising given that he had been built up to virtual rock star status over the preceding years. It is a testament to Bajoghli’s extensive research and deep insights that events like Soleimani’s assassination that have occurred after the completion of the book can be better understood because of her book, and it is my belief that it will continue to offer up valuable insights and a framework for understanding Iran’s regime media landscape for some time to come.

Throughout *Iran Reframed* Bajoghli writes in a lively and engaging style, inserting herself into the stories she narrates and frequently letting her interlocutors speak for themselves to provide a vivid picture of Iran’s regime media landscape and the people who work within it. It is a testament to her persistence and determination that she was able to gain unprecedented access and the trust of her interlocutors. This allows her to provide the reader with rare and valuable insights into this fascinating topic. Over the last few years Bajoghli, who holds a PhD from New York University and is Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins University, has established a profile as an authoritative media commentator, writing intermittently for the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*. Her book finds the perfect balance between scholarly authority and accessible expression, the words flowing off the page elegantly, making it simply a pleasure to read. *Iran Reframed* is a valuable addition to the field of Iranian media studies and will be of great value to anyone interested in Iranian media, film, culture, society and politics.

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The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qājār Persia, c. 1760–c. 1870, Thomas S. R. O. Flynn OP, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017, ISBN 978-90-04-16399-7 (hbk), xxvii + 1113 pp.

The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qajar Persia is by all accounts a monumental work; in its heft, with almost 1,000 pages of sprawling text; in the depth of its research, with some twenty-five archives and around 2,500 printed sources listed in the bibliography; as well as in its ambit, aspiration and achievement: it covers the entirety of the western missionary enterprise and activity in Iran writ large—modern Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan as well as the Caucasus, between the mid-eighteenth

and the mid-nineteenth century; which means that it connects the Safavid period to the Qajar era via the hitherto poorly researched post-Safavid eighteenth century. Flynn's study also brings to light the Christian—Armenian, Assyro-Chaldean, Nestorian—presence in the interstices between the Iranian, Russian and Ottoman empires, in an arc from Basra to Darband—a presence that, with the exception of Armenia and Georgia, has since largely disappeared from view. One of this study's other virtues is that it provides much new information about two important non-Christian "minority" communities of the region with whom the European missionaries engaged and interacted—the Zoroastrians and the Jews.

The book presents all this information with great clarity and precision, beginning with an introductory chapter titled "The Historical Backdrop," in which Flynn lays out the field and draws attention to the enormously large and underutilized body of source material available. The tone is plangent. The author laments the fact that the post-colonial turn in history has not exactly been kind to missionaries, who tend to be lumped together with the actual colonialists, and that Christianity has been virtually written out of Iran's history.

Chapters 2 and 3, jointly titled "Forerunners of the Nineteenth-Century Missionary Presence," set the stage for the actual task, reconstructing what the author calls a "vanished and virtually forgotten world" (p. 1). The first, dealing with the eighteenth century, presents a large amount of new material. Flynn here focuses on the largely forgotten Italian Father Leopoldo Sebastiani, classicist scholar and traveler who in 1805 arrived in Iran after having served on various earlier missions in the Ottoman Empire in the service of the Roman Congregatio della Propaganda Fide. For reasons unknown—Sebastiani did not write a full account of his travels—this colorful character sided with the British in the sensitive arena of foreign powers jockeying for attention and influence that was early Qajar Iran. Accused of being in the service of the English East India Company, Sebastiani became entangled in Fath 'Ali Shah's momentarily pro-French policies, which led to his expulsion from Iran in 1808. He spent the next five years in India, translating the New Testament into Persian. This work came out—anonymously so as to make it palatable to the Protestant missionary societies of India as well as to a Muslim audience—in 1813, beating the much better known (albeit rather defective) translation of the well-known British missionary Henry Martyn by a year.

Chapter 3 first discusses a remarkable missionary initiative to enter a tumultuous Iran in 1747—the year of Nader Shah's assassination—undertaken by some intrepid members of the German United Brethren, or Moravians, representatives of the Central European Pietist movement and the first Protestants to try and convert especially the Zoroastrians of the country's southeast. This led to a harrowing trip. The party left Isfahan on its way to Yazd, yet its members were forced to return after their caravan was robbed, and thus never reached their destination. In the face of continuing turmoil, they hastily left Iran via Bushehr.

The second part of the same chapter is devoted to Henry Martyn. As he does with leading missionaries in other chapters, Flynn provides a full-fledged biography of the Anglican missionary, detailing how he began his career in India as a chaplain to the

English East India Company and how, having traveled to Iran, he famously spent time in Shiraz engaged in religious dispute with the local mullahs, eliciting a flurry of rebuttals.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the missions sent to the North Caucasus during the reign of Tsar Alexander I (1801–25), a period when the Russians massively increased their influence in the Caucasus as they trounced the Iranians in war. Initially an advocate of liberal reform, Alexander propagated modern education—any education—as a means to “civilize” the wild regions on Russia’s southern, mostly Muslim flank, and to this end allowed western missionaries to operate in the region while supporting the creation of the Russian Bible Society. He was assisted in this by his minister of education and confidant Alexander Nikolaevich Golitsyn, who professed a pietistic form of Christianity. This government support enabled Scottish missionaries to be the first to try and convert the Kalmyks, setting up a mission in Karass in Nogay territory, which was in part designed to ransom slaves and educate the locals in the Word of God. In the process Karass as well as Shusha and Astrakhan became printing centers of Bible translations into Tatar-Turkish and Kalmyk. Other missionaries discussed in this chapter are German Moravians and Jesuits—the latter until their expulsion from Russia in 1820, just after they had had some success bringing a modicum of literacy to the mountaineers of the northern Caucasus.

The second part of this section, dealing with the activities of the German missionary Society known as the Basel Mission, amounts to a full biography of Karl Gottlieb Pfander (1803–65), their leader. Active in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, as well as in India, Pfander in 1834 had a refutation of Islam printed in Tabriz. Titled *Mizan al-Haqq*, this work turned the tables on the typical Muslim interpretation of Christianity as a corruption of the truth by arguing that the Qur’an itself was flawed and fallible, and that the violence of early Islamic history stood in stark contrast to the peacefulness of early Christianity. At a total of almost 300 pages, this part of the study could easily have been a separate monograph. The absence of any maps in the book is acutely felt here.

Chapter 8 begins with a long exposé on the East Syrian antecedents to the modern missionary initiatives among the Nestorians and the Assyrian Christians. It examines in particular the mission in Azerbaijan that was set up in the 1830s among the local Nestorians and Armenians by the American counterpart of the European pietists, the members of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, representatives of the Second Great Awakening of c. 1790–c. 1835. These were Presbyterians from New England, men like Justin Perkins and Asahel Grant who, like their forebears, were intrigued by the Iranian readiness to engage in discussion, to see divine truth as malleable and open to interpretation, and to regard the New Testament with curiosity and even admiration—an openness they mistakenly saw as a readiness to convert. Bringing something of the American frontier spirit to the land of the shah (p. 673), they straddled the Iranian and Ottoman border, settling in Urmia province as well as the dangerous Hakkari region, home to the “mountain Nestorians” as well as to various Kurdish tribes. Flynn discusses their educational activities, their contribution to literacy by way of the printing of books, including the first grammar and

dictionaries of ancient and modern Syriac as well as Azeri Turkish. He also probes the tensions that arose between the Americans and the local Nestorians, whom they saw as potential Protestants and who in turn ended up calling for their expulsion.

The next chapter, 9, examines the French Lazarist (Vincentian) mission in Iran, which essentially succeeded the Jesuit presence of earlier times. It was supported by Napoleon, who saw (French) missionaries as useful “cultural agents” and “founts of information” for his own ambitions in the East (p. 696). The chapter serves as a primer on French–Iranian diplomatic relations in the nineteenth century. Its main figure is the remarkable Eugène Boré, a representative of a newly emancipated ultramontane French Catholicism spreading its wings in the prevailing Restoration climate, who headed a mission to the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran as part of a series of French governmental scientific expeditions designed to expand knowledge about the East as much as acquaint its people with the Christian faith. Boré, a gifted linguist who had studied Oriental languages in Paris with the renowned Baron Silvestre de Sacy, resided in Iran between 1838 and 1841. In that period he established good relations with the reigning Mohammad Shah (r. 1834–48), which enabled him to secure the creation of the first French Lazarist mission in Iran. Forward thinking, he was also the first to propose the creation of a modern university in the country while working hard to set up preparatory schools in Tabriz.

Chapters 10 and 11, finally, deal with Christian missions among Iran’s Jewish community. Like the section on the North Caucasus, these chapters, totaling almost 200 pages, could easily have been conceived as a free-standing monograph. Chapter 10 includes a biography of another remarkable individual, the German Joseph Wolff (1795–1862), the father of Henry Drummond Wolff who from 1888 to 1891 served as British plenipotentiary in Tehran. Born Jewish but converting to Roman Catholicism at a young age, Joseph Wolff became an intrepid missionary, his multiple missions throughout the Middle East and Central Asia spanning three decades. His most daring expedition was the one he embarked on to find out about the fate of two British officers, Charles Stoddart and Arthur Conolly, who had been taken captive by the emir of Bukhara in 1842. Wolff learned that they had been executed. He himself was captured as well, but survived the ordeal, not by converting to Islam, which he refused to do, but thanks to a last-minute letter from Iran’s monarch, Mohammad Shah.

Continuing the Christian missions among Iran’s Jewish population, the last chapter more specifically focuses on the western lands, Baghdad and Mesopotamia at large. Here, too, the suffering of local Jewish communities, their poverty, ignorance and oppression are highlighted. Much of the chapter is taken up by another biographical overview. In this case we follow the peregrinations of Henry Aaron Stern (1820–85), another British Jewish convert turned Anglican missionary who in 1845 set out to shepherd the Jews of Mesopotamia to the Christian faith. His travels took him to Iran, where he successively met with the Jewish communities of Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan and Tehran. One might take issue with Flynn’s verdict of Stern as being “dispassionate and objective in his judgements of Persian and Persian Islam” (pp. 926–7) given the irredeemable anti-Semitism of this lapsed Jew and the unbounded condescension with which he described Iranians.

This brings me to the tenor of the book. Flynn writes from an explicitly Christian perspective. He does so in part because his study, inevitably, leans heavily on the writings of the missionaries themselves. But he also does so from conviction—a conviction of faith as well as a conviction about the noble intention of the missionaries he discusses. He is open and non-apologetic in his belief that they made a tremendous and mostly unacknowledged or simply forgotten contribution to the “modernization” of the region, by promoting literacy, by establishing schools in largely illiterate societies, by introducing the first printing presses and by providing modern medical assistance where none existed. He makes a strong and, to this reviewer’s mind, compelling argument, for the notion that the western missionaries were not simply mindless handmaidens of western imperialism, (willing) participants in the “Great Game.” Unlike the agents of imperialism and colonialism, Flynn insists, the missionaries were not motivated by territorial ambition, profit or personal glory, but by the idea of advancing the glory of God by way of spreading His Word, the Gospel. They chose simplicity over comfort; they endured tremendous hardship working in conditions of often grinding poverty and deep isolation, and in the face of (a habitual) failure to convert Muslims. The sacrifices they made clearly elicit Flynn’s admiration.

Yet this study is far from being culturally and religiously triumphalist. Flynn does not make his case unthinkingly or even uncritically. Fully aware of the pitfalls of “Orientalism” and “postcolonialism” adhering to his topic, he doesn’t just emphasize the virtues of the missionaries. Although he doesn’t see them as (conscious) agents of colonialism, he has a keen eye for what he calls their “patronizing assumption of cultural superiority,” of their “sense of historical destiny to enlighten the rest of the world,” and everything that entails in terms of assumptions informing activity. And he gives the societies in which they operated their due as well. While he makes no bones about the suspicion and even hostility they often encountered, typically from the ranks of the Muslim clerical classes, he pays ample attention to the “free-thinking” element in Iranian culture and society in its encounter with these outsiders, the curiosity, the willingness, indeed, eagerness to discuss and debate the nature of God, the very essence of “truth,” all the important questions about life, including its very purpose and meaning.

Flynn may have written an old-fashioned type of history. But he gloriously succeeds in reconstructing the “vanished and virtually forgotten world” of European attempts at evangelization of Iran and the lands around it. In addition to offering a cornucopia of information, much of it new, this is a deeply humanistic book that holds out hope, not just for cross-cultural coexistence, but for mutual understanding through active and critical engagement with the “Other.”

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