



Faithful Encounters:

Authorities and American Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire

By Emrah Şahin

Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 272 pp.,
Paper. £19.78 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-0773554627.

*Reviewed by Ali Erken
Department of Middle East Political History and International Relations,
Marmara University, Istanbul*

Until the beginning of World War II, missionary activities had been one of the hot issues in American-Turkish relations. Grabill's (1971) seminal work on missionary activity was the first serious study on the subject and largely relied on American sources. In recent years, scholarly research has shed a closer light into the American missionary activities. The works of Sabev (2014), Doğan and Sharkey (2011), Gumus (2017) and Anderson (2011) have made valuable contributions to the study of American schools and missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire. The richness of Ottoman and American archives, along with biographical accounts, still offers a lot of themes to explore. Emrah Şahin's *Faithful Encounters: Authorities and American Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire* is another significant scholarly endeavor in this field. Şahin is a lecturer at University of Florida. His area of research includes different dimensions of Ottoman-American encounters, including trade networks and migrations. Şahin notes that during this research he reviewed nearly 2200 dossiers in the Ottoman Archives about the missionary activities.

In the first chapter Şahin discusses the early attitudes of the Ottoman authorities towards missionaries. It is understood that the Ottoman bureaucrats in Istanbul treated reports coming from provinces cautiously. They at first wanted to monitor the methods of missionary activities especially in the periphery regions. The missionaries were operating not only in Anatolia but also in Arab lands and Balkans (p.34). The Ottoman rulers held the conviction that uneducated Ottoman subjects could be manipulated by the third parties. Conversion of Muslim subjects to another religion was, however, unacceptable. The solution was not to shoot down missionary schools but to strengthen Islamic belief. (p.37). On the other hand, for some Americans it was the time to settle the "Eastern Question" for all. (pp.16-17). Şahin concludes that Americans and Turks act with emotions rather than realities, building competed narratives on these encounters.

In the second chapter the author investigates some of the controversial cases the missionaries were involved. A primary example of such confrontations was the kidnap of Ellen Stone, a missionary in the Balkans, by bandits. The story provoked great public reaction in the United States. Another incident was

the arrest of an American missionary due to his activities in the town of Bitlis. He was accused of inciting ethnic and religious conflict supporting the Armenians in the region to rebel against the Ottoman state (p. 58). Similar cases, Şahin argues, were indicative of state's changing practices of security about the missionary problem. Besides, the Ottoman authorities were keen to solve criminal issues as a part of their domestic affair, refusing any kind of interference from the American side. This attitude was partly a result of the ongoing Armenian rebellions in Anatolia and revolutionary activities in the Balkans. The government officials held that college teachers were calling students to rise against the state or provoking ethnic tensions among the Kurdish, Armenian, Turkish and Greek subjects.

The third chapter discusses the regulatory steps taken by the Ottoman state. The author demonstrates that authorities in Istanbul tried to standardize and control missionary education in distant towns. They were in constant coordination with officials in local provinces in issuing legal grants or permissions for the opening of a school or making an extension to school buildings. All these procedures had to be completed in accordance with the regulations of education and property laws. Şahin notes that Robert College and the American University of Beirut enjoyed exceptional treatment as they could obtain permissions for any kind of innovation much easier than the schools in the periphery (p. 86). The Ottomans' insistence on regulating missionary services did not only concern the field of education, but also extended to health services. William Dodd, a member of the experienced missionary family, was forced to close his dispensary in Kayseri due to complaints from local patients. For the Americans, Dodd was an exemplary self-sacrificing doctor working for the good of people, despite reports from Ottoman authorities about severe misconduct towards patients in his hospitals authorities (pp. 95-97). These regulatory steps were extended to the use of symbols as well. Ottoman officials sometimes visited the American colleges and observed photographs, maps or other symbols used in buildings. The use of church bells was another matter of contention. According to the Ottoman authorities, uncontrolled bell singing was a symbolic intrusion on Ottoman power and the missionaries were forbidden to ring the bells outside of fixed times.

In Chapter 5, "Ink saw the daylight", Şahin examines the processes of missionary printing in the Ottoman State. The missionary printers had to sign censorship protocol and each publication had to be reviewed by the Ottoman officials before the release. Any political criticism or religious propaganda was not allowed. Şahin warns that in that case it is hard to judge the real impact of missionary publications as they did not reflect their real thoughts (p. 102). The Inspection and Examination Committee followed publications very closely. The careers of Henry Jessup and Henry Dwight, two of the leading missionary publishers in the Ottoman State, reflect how they came to terms with the state regulations. Şahin puts that missionary printings posed an existential threat to the Central Ottoman State and writers such as Ahmet Mithat did not refrain themselves from criticizing the missionary press openly (pp.131-132). The author concludes that there was an obvious anti-missionary consensus among the Ottoman ruling elite regardless of their political affiliation.

Şahin's work is an archival achievement. It penetrates into the world of Ottoman bureaucrats and how they tried to manage missionary activity. The book is thus a valuable contribution to the study of late Ottoman statecraft and missionary strategies. The narrative might be more forceful with a discussion of the political atmosphere after the Berlin Congress. If archival sources allow, it would be intriguing to look into how the Ottomans related the loss of territories in Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878) with the missionary activities after 1880.