

Anscombe, Frederick F. *State, Faith, and Nation in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Lands*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014. 323 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index.

The book under review is as ambitious as its title suggests. Anscombe narrates his perspective on the turbulent history of Ottoman and post-Ottoman lands over the past 250 years as a contribution to multiple frameworks of interpretation instead of single “truths” that came to dominate the views of the Balkans and the Middle East. In a very personal almost confessional style Anscombe rejects the overemphasized force of nationalism and what he claims is misrepresentation of the role of religion, especially Islam, in copious literature on Eastern question and nationalist production of post-Ottoman states. According to Anscombe, a wider Europeanising, modernising and secularising narrative has come to shape the historiography of the last two centuries, which helped include the two troubled regions in European and global historical trends but problems arose with the recent “revival” of nationalism, which was then hastily explained off by Balkan exceptionalism, Balkanism, Orientalism or some similar sort of historical determinism. His conclusions sit well with most recent perspectives on the late Ottoman period and research into Orthodox Churches in the Balkans (Lucian Leustan, ed., *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Southeastern Europe*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

The key to Anscombe’s reinterpretation is the analysis of social aspects of religion, most significantly the Islamic principles of the just society, which came under threat from Sultan Selim III (1789-1807) onwards. Furthermore, Anscombe argues foreign pressure not nationalism tore the Ottoman Empire apart. Nationalism in his analysis is essentially a post-Ottoman construction too weak to solidify and legitimate new states as religion successfully did for centuries before. Move forward to contemporary issues, Anscombe charts the path of denouncing the “sleeping beauty” paradigm of nationalism insisting nationalism was not reawakened but (re)deployed because of fears and unpredictability caused by the demise of Cold War status quo. In the Balkans but especially in Arab states, whose frameworks were set by Western powers, nationalism resulted in state failure and political instability. This also explains recent burgeoning of religion and its renewed primacy as a group identity maker employed to legitimize many national (i.e. state) politics.

However, the wealth of detail and issues covered might hinder the lay reader whereas a specialist might be put off by numerous errors and lack of focus in such ambitiously conceived book despite its sound arguments and rich insights. While Anscombe is right to criticize the previous historiography for essentialism his arguments also dangerously stray that path as historical continuities are projected, parallels exaggerated and all that does not conform deemed exceptional. For example he claims all resistance to Ottoman central power to be foreign imported as if it is possible to neatly divide what is domestic and what foreign in a huge and heterogeneous Empire with porous borders. Anscombe denies the Serbian nature of the Serbian Uprising in 1804, which is a plausible but not sufficiently argued point, especially when author refers to it as rebellion of Belgrade Christians at the time when there were none and all insurgents came from rural areas inhabited by Serbs. Similarly, the Patriarchate of Peć (Ipek) was not a predecessor of the modern Serbian Orthodox Church but denying it and other Ottoman institutions and policies any ethnic aspect is equally misleading.

Furthermore, Anscombe’s rigid analytical frame in explaining lack of legitimate rulers throughout post-Ottoman space ignores their Habsburg and other non-Ottoman legacies, two world wars, Cold war, troublesome transition after 1989 and a myriad of other issues. Comparison of these two

regions and post-Ottoman framework are demonstrated as useful and increasingly employed (Karl Kaser, *The Balkans and the Near East: Introduction to a Shared History*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011) but there is simply no overarching explanation for a multitude of phenomena in this or any other part of the globe. Strangely Austria-Hungary's rule of Bosnia is excluded from discussion even though it represents the best case for comparing models of governance and nation building. Finally, in a volume that purports to reinterpret the role of religion there is remarkably little discussion about religion or religious identity and how they are embraced and enacted by people. The use of religion as a source of justice and ethics in governance is rightly emphasized but religion is sadly disassociated from other spheres of life such as economy or warfare.