

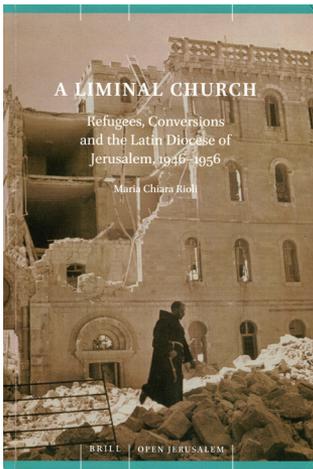
BOOK REVIEWS

Upheaval of the Latin Catholic Community in Palestine (1946–1949)

Attempts of Reorganization and Consolidation in Jordan and Israel (1950–1956)

Review of: *A Liminal Church: Refugees, Conversions and the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem, 1946-1956*, by Maria Chiara Rioli. Leiden, Brill, 2020 (*Open Jerusalem 2*). Xiv+387 pp. \$204 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-42372-5; \$155 (e-book), 978-90-04-42371-8.

Reviewed by Paolo Pieraccini



Abstract

A Liminal Church by Maria Chiara Rioli brings significant new historical information to the history of contemporary Palestine. Her central themes are the disruptions suffered by the Latin patriarchal diocese in Jerusalem following the war of 1948–49 and the efforts to reorganize this Church in Israel and Jordan. The chapters dedicated to the period 1946–1949 deal with the position of the Christian churches on partitioning Palestine, Catholic fears about the establishment of the State of Israel, the Arab reaction, Israel's occupation of Catholic properties, and accusations of Israeli desecration of Christian symbols. Of particular interest is the examination of the internal upheaval within the Latin patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem following the exodus of Palestine's Arab population as a result of Israeli military operations and forced expulsion. From 1950 to 1956, the Palestinian Latin Church faced a number of Israeli and Jordanian laws limiting the activities of the Christian communities. The author focuses as well on the symbolic phenomenon of a number of Jews married to Christians that began the controversial process of conversion to Christianity. The book also addresses Catholic anti-communism in Israel and Jordan and the attempts of the Latin and Greek Melkite churches to fight it.

Keywords

Israel; Jordan; Palestine: Holy See; Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem; Custody of Holy Land; Palestinian Refugees; Zionism; Communism; Judeo-Christians in Israel.

Maria Chiara Rioli's exceptional book *A Liminal Church: Refugees, Conversions and the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem, 1946–1956* falls under the categories of Church history and Catholic studies, but it goes far beyond these, offering crucial insights on the history of Palestine in the mid-twentieth century. The book's two central themes are the upheavals suffered by the Latin patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem following the Palestine war of 1947–49 and the efforts to reorganize this Church – small but influential locally, with a global reach – while both Israel and Jordan sought to consolidate their own status in Jerusalem and beyond. Rioli's volume eschews Orientalist and Eurocentric approaches that still permeate various areas of Church history and Catholic studies, offering a narrative devoid of stereotypes and “common knowledge.” The Latin Patriarchate lends itself to such a study: it is a local church of Latin rite directly subordinate to the Holy See and, at the same time, a global diocese made up of Arab and foreign clergy, Arab faithful, and a small group of Catholics of Jewish origin. This cultural multiformity, Rioli notes, requires a polyphonic historical reconstruction that accounts for differences and political divisions without neglecting the general trends that characterize Christian life in Palestine, Israel, and Jordan.

Rioli's research examines several neglected aspects of Palestinian history. The chapters dedicated to the period between 1946 and 1949 deal with the position of the Christian churches on partitioning Palestine, Catholic fears about the establishment of the State of Israel and the inevitable Arab reaction, Israel's occupation of many Catholic properties, and accusations of desecration of Christian symbols levelled at the Israeli army (and, by contrast, the churches' appreciation of the behavior of Arab troops). Of particular interest is Rioli's examination of the internal upheaval within the Latin patriarchal diocese of Jerusalem following the exodus of Palestine's Arab population as a result of Israeli military operations and forced expulsion. Many parishes located in what had become Israeli territory drastically downsized, and a number closed, while the number of parishioners within the kingdom of Jordan grew exponentially. Jaffa, Haifa, Qana, Lydda, Mujaydal, Tiberias, and Bisan were emptied of parishioners, while the Franciscan parish of Nazareth grew with the arrival of a large number of refugees. Parishes located in territories that fell under Jordanian control, like Ramallah, Bayt Jala and 'Abbud, and the Franciscan parishes of Jerusalem and Bethlehem also witnessed a rapid increase in their numbers. Beyond the Jordan, the increase was even greater; to cope with the influx of refugees, the Latin Patriarchate opened three new parishes, in Zarqa', Irbid, and Amman, with the latter numbering about seven thousand people – the largest in the diocese, surpassing even Bethlehem and Jerusalem, which had for centuries been the most significant. Meanwhile, the Patriarchal See sat vacant from 1947 to 1949, as the Holy See debated whether to create a single Catholic diocese, uniting the Latin Patriarchal See with the multiple Melkite ecclesiastical districts of Palestine and Jordan. The former Custos of the Holy Land, Alberto Gori, was called to manage this delicate situation, which involved a relatively small number of Catholics but was perceived as a tragedy for the land and its people.

From 1950 to 1956, the Palestinian Latin Church faced, among other complicating factors, a number of Israeli and Jordanian laws limiting the activities of the Christian communities, especially in the sensitive areas of education, welfare, and, in the case

of Israel, marriage (in Israel mixed marriages are not recognized, though they can be registered by the Interior Ministry if contracted abroad). Each state, for different reasons, saw Christians as a threat to its character. In this context, Rioli focuses on a quantitatively insignificant, but symbolically potent phenomenon: a number of Jewish individuals married to Christians living in Israel and Jordan began the controversial process of conversion to Christianity. Initially, the church hierarchies – including the Custos of the Holy Land, Giacinto Faccio – showed little interest in these new followers. Shown scant interest by the Patriarchate and the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, a few priests who had come to Israel in the late 1940s and had provided some covert pastoral care to converts decided to act independently. By the early 1950s, the Church hierarchy became aware of this clandestine pastoral work, and Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Church, pushed the Latin Patriarchate to act, beginning the long and tortured process of recognizing and providing for Jewish converts. The church worked to establish private spaces (*foyers*) in which converts could gather and practice their faith. In the mid-1950s, the Association of Saint James the Apostle – named after the first bishop of Jerusalem to link the newly formed group to the early Judeo-Christian community – was established “to organize and coordinate the various apostolate and assistance activities in favor of families already Christian or converted from Judaism in Israel.” Almost nothing has been written about the Association of Saint James and Jewish converts, as these have drawn negative attention and at times threats of physical violence. Rioli’s excellent discussion of this group expertly navigates the controversies that may have prevented other scholars from writing about them.

A Liminal Church also addresses Catholic anti-communism in Israel and Jordan and the anti-Communist meaning naively attributed by the Franciscan Custody to the construction of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. Despite their differences, the Church approached communism in Palestine and Israel as the same as communism in Europe (perhaps because Church leaders were from Italy, where the Communist Party was the second largest political force). Communism found traction among Palestinians in the Galilee, particularly in Nazareth, where the arrival of large numbers of refugees combined with strict military rule negatively affected living conditions. Communist-dominated trade unions controlled access to the few job opportunities available to Palestinians in the Galilee, and the party also presented the only non-Zionist political faction tolerated by the Israeli state. Communism’s spread among the Palestinian population combined with the association of Zionism and Bolshevism, exacerbated by the expansion of the collectivist kibbutz model, spurred fears of an alliance between Jewish and Arab communists – many of them Christians, including local leaders.

Given the dearth of publications dedicated to the Catholic Church in Palestine covering this period, Rioli’s work will certainly be scrutinized by political and Church leaders, as well as scholars. She is careful not to make any accusation or allege collaboration between Arabs and Jews, but her findings suggest the need to look more carefully into the intellectual history of this period and its practical repercussions. Already in 1948, Antonio Vergani, the Latin patriarchal vicar in the Galilee, put forward practical proposals to remove the faithful from the influence of organizations linked to the Israeli Communist Party. Together with the Melkite archbishop Georges Hakim, Vergani promoted a

Catholic trade union (*al-Rabita*) that, officially recognized by the Israeli state, affiliated in 1951 with the Histadrut, the most important Israeli trade union. Rioli suggests that the Church co-opted those who supported socialist ideas by offering a space to promote their demands, following a similar path to that taken in post-war Italy.

The final chapter is dedicated to 1956: during this year, news spread of a possible abolition of the Latin Patriarchate in favor of a single Eastern Catholic diocese; rumors played on dissensions and traditional rivalries between Latins and Melkites and to a certain extent represented the reality of an uneasy coexistence. Nasserism's influence accentuated claims about the election of ecclesiastical hierarchies of Arab origin and the participation of the laity in the financial administration of the Patriarchate. In response, priests met with the highest political leaders of Israel and negotiated the recognition of Christians of Jewish origin in the Israeli state – a group now viewed with a certain favor, due in no small part to these converts' Zionism, which contrasts starkly with the pro-Arab positions of most of the diocese clergy and faithful. This led to some improvement in relations between the state and the Latin Vicariate of Galilee and to a gradual reconsideration of Israel by the Holy See in the last years of Pius XII, foreshadowing the transformation in Jewish–Catholic relations launched by John XXIII (1958–1963). For the Latin Church of the Holy Land, therefore, 1956 heralded a number of significant phenomena that the Second Vatican Council, the 1967 war, and subsequent events would bring fully to light.

Overall, Maria Chiara Rioli approaches her subject with clear language, effective presentation, and extensive archival research. Rioli conducted research in more than forty different archives: first and foremost, she draws on the precious and almost underexplored archive of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, but she also makes use of private, diocesan, municipal, Zionist, and diplomatic archives, as well as the records of various international and ecclesiastical organizations. Rioli also uses the Vatican archives and those of various Catholic congregations in the Holy Land, examined at the General Curia in Rome and locally in Jerusalem; these latter archives are sometimes difficult to access and poorly inventoried (when not completely lacking in research aids). *A Liminal Church* also presents for the first time material from the archives of the pontificate of Pius XII (1939–58), newly released in March 2020. The book's use of images is also rich, including a letter from the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem to Pope Pius XII via Georges Hakim, and a number of photographs from the 1947–49 war, concerning the relief work for refugees, and documenting important Christian religious, educational, and welfare institutions. In sum, *A Liminal Church* constitutes a reference to understand this important period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Palestine, Israel, and Jordan. Yet it also succeeds in combining “local” and “global” history, placing the events of the Latin diocese of Jerusalem within the international history of years of crucial importance for the Middle East.

Paolo Pieraccini holds a PhD in the history of international relations (University of Florence) and in law (University of Paris XI). He has authored several books on the policy of the Great Powers and the Holy See towards Palestine, on Palestinian Catholicism, and on political, diplomatic, juridical, archaeological, and religious aspects of the question of Jerusalem.