Bernard Heyberger, *Hindiyya : Mystique et criminelle (1720-1798)*

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*Hindiyya* is a consummate piece of historical writing that combines biographical narrative, long-term structure analysis and good old-fashioned murder mystery. Revisiting some of the themes from his seminal 1994 study *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme Catholique*¹, Bernard Heyberger sets out to investigate the life, career and mental world of the Maronite prioress and mystic Hindiyya ‘Ujaymi (d. 1798), one of the most colourful and certainly most controversial figures in the early modern Levant. The result, more than just an important contribution to Lebanese and Catholic Church history, also offers a unique gender-based understanding of the impact of European imperialism on one segment of Ottoman-era society. If any regret can be voiced about this book at all, it is that Hindiyya's case as well as the sources treated here may indeed be so original and particular as to defy useful methodological comparison with, or insertion into, Middle Eastern history in a wider sense.

The study is arranged chronologically in four parts, beginning with Hindiyya's childhood in Aleppo in the first half of the 18th century. Born into a devout, upper middle class Maronite family, it is the profound changes in oriental Christianity in this period that play a key role in Hindiyya's later career as a living saint. Since the Catholic Reformation, Jesuit and other Latin missionaries had increasingly brought local Christian society into the sphere of Roman influence, the split within the Orthodox community and the Melkites' union with the Catholic Church being the best-known result. However, Heyberger also reveals a more profound rupture between traditional, lineage-based religious identity and a newer, more individualistic and affective form of devotion among Aleppo's Christians irrespective of confessional denomination. For young women in particular, who in the past might be even more sequestered than their Muslim sisters, studying with a “Frankish” friar or joining one of the new Latin religious orders could be a means to avoid early marriage and instead lead a life of self-determination. The author explores some possible historical-psychoanalytical explanations for Hindiyya's growing pietism and penchant for ecstatic visions (e.g. diagnosing her with hysterical neurosis and later on with paranoid psychosis); more pertinent and convincing is his portrayal (chapter 4) of how European cultural influences, from popular literary tracts on saints' lives to the new realism of baroque painting to an enlightenment fascination with anatomy, informed her mystical obsession with the body of Christ. Given to self-laceration and extreme fasting from an early age, Hindiyya finally divulges her visions of Jesus asking for her hand as his spiritual bride. With the shepherding of her Jesuit confessor, her claim to sainthood is concretized by the miraculous appearance of stigmata, an engagement ring, and prophetic abilities. Therewith begins not only a stellar religious-charismatic career, but also a fierce contest between local and Roman Church authorities for control over her.

able to found her own convent, the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, on Khazin property at Bkerké in 1750. Part II of this work is perhaps the most informative in terms of local political history, as it deftly illustrates the role of religion in the growing independence of the Maronites in 18th-century Mt Lebanon. Backed by both France and the Shihabi emirate, the Khazins were using their extensive waqf landholdings to patronize the newly established Lebanese Order and other monastic groups and thus supersede the patriarchate as the locus of power within the Maronite community. The Holy See, on the other hand, was becoming ever more determined in this time to stamp its authority on all Catholic institutions, and viewed both secular interference in, and lack of proper Church control over, women's religious orders in Mt Lebanon with increasing suspicion. With Hindiyya there was indeed cause for concern, as her doctrine of her own “mysterious union” with Christ, legitimized through frequent prophetic visions, bleedings, and demonic admonitions, began to command the obedience of the local highland population; the author asks (p. 139) what role a small group of Muslim Shihabi women devoted to Hindiyya may in fact have played in the conversion of the entire Shihabi dynasty to Christianity around this time. Still, her vocation of Sacred-Heart spiritualism can be seen to have been fully in line with European and especially Italian models of the time, and a papal mission sent to investigate her order (at the instigation of the Jesuits!) in 1753 yielded no evidence of heresy per se. Despite strong reservations about Hindiyya's honesty and a “misogynist” attitude toward charismatic female saints in general, the papal authorities preferred to bury the issue—thus perhaps paving the way for the order's rapid descent into chaos and violence.

Hindiyya's mounting megalomania and the campaign to dissolve her order, the subjects of parts III and IV, serve the author to throw the conflict of local vs. external factors in Lebanese politics in the later 18th century into greater relief. The 1754/1768 scission of the Maronite Lebanese Order into Aleppine (Halabi) and mountain (Baladi) factions was an aspect of this conflict whose importance has heretofore probably been underestimated. Hindiyya, being partial in this regard to the diffuse, distant authority represented by the Maronite patriarch (Yusuf Istfan was in fact wholly under her sway) and the Aleppine clergy, started to persecute women at her convent from Baladi families, who along with the local Maronite episcopacy supported the strong, centralized government of the Shihabi emirs. Reports of nuns being beaten, humiliated and possibly even poisoned at the convent reached a papal legation sent to investigate in 1774, but were brushed off by the patriarch as being politically motivated. In true cult fashion, Hindiyya and her acolytes began to perceive any form of opposition as a satanic plot, and subsequently set themselves above all moral and religious constraints in the name of defending the “mystery of the union.” The full extent of the horror at Bkerké—the systematic use of torture and exorcism to extract confessions from nuns accused of conspiring against Hindiyya—came to light only after the beating death of one of two Baladi sisters, a murder the tormentors maintained until the very end had been committed by the devil himself.

To Heyberger, this crisis within the Maronite community was, much like witch-hunts in 17th-century Europe, metaphoric of the weakness of Church authority in a time of profound social anxieties, especially among women, over confessional pluralism (p. 267-8). Indeed, it was only after the intervention and seizure of the convent by the Shihabi emir, for whom re-establishing Rome's ecclesiastic authority was a means to consolidate his own secular rule over the Maronite community in this time, that the Congregation of the Sacred Heart was finally dissolved and the rebel patriarch deposed. If Hindiyya's ascent in grace was characterized by the frequent inversion of power between her and her nominal superiors, her banishment bespeaks also the rationalization of authority in Lebanon in the hands of the Shihabis in the late 18th century. However, Hindiyya's unresolved place in the Lebanese collective memory leads the
author to venture a more provocative conclusion as well. The majority of previous studies have tended to absolve Hindiyya of any personal wrongdoing, painting charismatic mysticism as the real essence of Lebanese religiosity and her as the victim of secular greed and Roman bullying. In fact neither Hindiyya nor any of the other actors were ever called to account for, or repented of, their material crimes at Bkerké. The disavowal of individual responsibility and the unending quest for “justice” from some higher authority, in the author's opinion, also marks the story of Hindiyya as one of Lebanese clientelism and sectarianism, a paroxysm in the construction of Maronite cultural and political identity that remains relevant still today.

_Hindiyya_ breaks new ground as a study of religious deviance and _mentalité_ in an early modern Levantine society. It owes its interest, however, to a historiographical context that is clearly more Christian and European than it is Arab Middle Eastern. As with other classics of _mentalité_ history, it is the detailed inquisitional reports of contemporary Catholic Church officials sent to investigate the flocks' spiritual state that afford such keen insight into Hindiyya's evolving personality. Indeed, the essence of Heyberger's vast array of materials comes from the Roman archives of the Propaganda Fide; Arabic sources feature largely in the form of Maronite religious tracts, and Ottoman official sources, not at all. When one considers that Hindiyya's lifelong fight against authority revolved around such issues as whether it was permissible to sell her blood and hair as living relics, or if she could unilaterally lift the prohibition on eating meat on the Friday of the Feast of the Sacred Heart (with her Halabi supporters pointedly eating fatty foods in defiance of Rome that day), one feels distinctly that hers is a story not of Ottoman, but of Roman Catholic provincial society. This in no way detracts from the book's merit. To the contrary, it helps drive home what makes Lebanon historically and historiographically different.