This book reconfirms Bruce Masters as a preeminent expert in Ottoman-and-Arab history, one thoroughly versed not just in the imperial and local primary sources, but in the issues and debates of both modern Turkish and Arabic scholarship as well. His study tackles a topic which postorientalist research has often shunned but which has lost none of its pertinence to contemporary Near Eastern affairs: the increasingly separate evolution of the Ottoman empire's non-Muslim minorities under the pressure of European imperial expansion. Yet while generally successful in conveying the profound transformation of minority religious identity over four centuries of Ottoman rule, this work suffers from an ambivalence of focus and a reticence in arguing that make it seem to the reader as too much and too little at the same time.

The sweep of Master's approach is indisputably broad, as he introduces the Constitution of Medina, the Pact of ‘Umar, dhimmi status, jizya taxes, the Crusades, Ebu's-Su'ud's reforms, millets, ‘asabīya, Türkçülük, the inventedness of tradition and the contingency of nationality as the changing parameters of Christian and Jewish identity over the course of Islamic history. What is lacking, however, is a narrative structure that then gives a unified sense to the evolution and enfranchisement of the religious minorities in the Arab lands as opposed to elsewhere. The author's main thesis, namely that Christians and Jews were quickest to capitalize on Europe's growing commercial and diplomatic presence, is too universal, and his discussion of proselytization, sectarian violence and imperial/ethnic re-identification in the nineteenth century too specific to individual communities to justify "the Ottoman Arab world" as a perspective. This leads to some rather unambitious conclusions in the end, viz., that Ottoman rule "opened the door" to European influence, which in turn "had a dramatic effect on some of the region's Christian and Jewish inhabitants [...] with many making the conscious choice at various times... to embrace a political community beyond that which they had inherited as 'tradition.'" (pp. 189, 199)

The real substance of this book concerns the Uniate Catholics of Aleppo and their separation from the Greek Orthodox Church. The near total urbanization of the region's Christian and Jewish denominations by the 17th century, the author shows in chapter two, left them in the best position to profit from European trade expansion, which gave rise to a new Christian bourgeoisie in the commercial capital Aleppo in particular. The advantages of French consular protection, foreign missionary education and, above all, the wish to install local, Arabic-speaking candidates in the patriarchate of Antioch increasingly motivated the upstart Orthodox notability to opt for union with Rome; chapter three veritably loses itself in details of the Fakhr, ‘Ā'ida and Dīb families taken from an astounding range of Başbakanlık, Foreign Office and Aleppo court records. The regional rivalry between Aleppo and Damascus and the battle for ascendancy between the French- and Sublime Porte-backed Rum factions affords Syria specialists an engrossing read, but one with no evident rapport to the numerous other groups surveyed at the start, who ultimately constitute less of an actual subject of inquiry than a cogent foil to the Uniate Catholic experience.

The Aleppo perspective also dominates the final two chapters, where Masters provides an authoritative account of the growing politicization of education and confessional identity in the 19th century, as well as the episodes of urban sectarian violence in the Tanzimat era,
basically corroborating other scholars' explanation of Muslim "panic" and "fear" over apparent minority preference as its fundamental causes. Having already recast themselves as a "Syrian" Church, however, Uniate and then Christian intellectuals in general succeeded in finding mutual ground with their Muslim countrymen in an Arab cultural identity, began to perceive a common destiny in Ottoman citizenship, and after 1908 joined the vanguard of Arab nationalists (though less in Aleppo than in Damascus). Compelling as this tale of local self-determination-slash-cosmopolitanism may be, it leaves the question of what happened to the sectarianism whose roots are prominently addressed at least in the book's subtitle. Many of the author's main premises, for example the high urbanization rate of Christians, the identification of the indigenous Muslims with the Ottoman regime, and the unintrusiveness of western missionaries in local politics hold much less true for the Lebanon, which he nevertheless only handles lightly under the outdated rubric of a Druze-Maronite "mountain refuge" but where sectarianism was more ramified than elsewhere.

This leaves us with chapter four: a positive tour de force on the propagation of the Ottoman millet concept. If Benjamin Braude laid to rest the myth of a primeval system of state-minority relations 20 years ago, structuralist writers have continued to posit that the empire's non-Muslim subjects were consistently organized by confessional group in legal affairs as well as in taxation. Masters' discussion in this regard, integrating first-hand archival research and critical comparisons with other patriarchates, shows not just the Aleppo Unia's struggle to become a distinct "Melkite" Church in the 17th-19th century, but that the very doctrine of unitary, centrally-run Orthodox and Catholic millets was only developed by the state concomittantly to contain such separatist tendencies. Through the story of the Melkites' changing assignment, the entire "millet system" emerges, much like gaza, decline and other presumed truths of Ottoman history, as a discourse constructed by the state authority over a specific time in response to specific challenges. Masters' contribution here makes a subject, a region and a period that are generally forsaken in standard works central to the larger imperial picture; it is the very paragon of what Ottoman provincial history can and should accomplish. This book is both unsatisfying and challenging, and will likely be read very differently by others. It will hopefully form the starting-point for discussing Ottoman religious minorities for a long time to come.