Adam H. Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2015). Pp. 432; $32.50.

R. TODD GODWIN, THE INSTITUTE FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN STUDIES, CAMBRIDGE, UK

Delivering once again the type of intelligent, creative, and erudite work he is known for, Adam Becker's newest book takes Syriac studies out of the past and into the contemporary period by offering us an energetic probe into the origins of "nationalism" among East Syriac Christians (between 1840 and 1918) and its connections to American Protestant missionaries. For Becker this nationalism led to East Syrians' embrace of the appellation "Assyrian"—a late 19th-century creation—and for him a sign that ethnic nationalism had come to be (at least at times) more important than "religion" as a component within East Syrian identity. I put quotation marks around these and other key terms because this is something the book's arguments and primary source probing does as well, in a manner of speaking. As Becker writes: "through a close reading of the sources, the book reconstructs the social and intellectual world of the American mission (to East Syrians at Urmia, Iran, ca. 1840–1918), and in so doing tells the story of how Protestant religious (devotional, creedal, epistemological, and moral) reform and the practices, ideas, and affects the missionaries aimed to cultivate helped foster a new secular national identity" (p. 6). Becker provides us with eight chapters in making this argument, covering the period from the Congregational Church and Justin Perkins' "Mission to the Nestorians" (beginning in 1838 and continuing to WW I); and within this chronology Becker examines how a national consciousness arose between East Syrians and their American Protestant interlocutors. Becker is at times more careful than others to say this involved East Syrian agency as well, though a hermeneutic of agency is problematized too at the end of chapter one, and in one of the book's many gems—its forays into theoretical historiography.

The first chapter sets the stage with a look at the local geography and pre-missions context the missionaries would encounter in the 1840s in the plain of Urmia (a region thusly called due to its proximity to Lake Urmia), in a remote and mountainous and thus lightly governed Ottoman province called Hakkari, in what is today

part of Iran (though within a province Iran calls West Azerbaijan). The second chapter moves back across the Atlantic and examines the thought-world of Perkins and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). The third chapter begins to move into the encounter between the two groups and focuses on the epistemological rift that existed in and around East Syrians' pre-modern script and manuscript culture versus the missioners' printed books and print culture (one of a dozen fascinating pathways Becker has uncovered as a way of analyzing the development of national consciousness and social body conceptions among East Syrians and the relationships between East Syrians, these intellectual conceptions, and the American missionaries). The fourth chapter looks at the curriculum and daily life of the mission's schools. The fifth chapter offers a fascinating examination of contestations over death rituals and the East Syrians' pre-modern views of death and the communion of saints which occurred between the two groups (the missionaries finding East Syrian death rituals and thought to be far too Catholic and unmodern and in need of reform). The sixth and seventh chapters focus on "native assistants" and the journals and publications of East Syrians under the sway of the mission, and gradually move forward through the nineteenth century. In these latter two chapters the secularism implicit in the missioners' world view (which Becker is at pains to say was implicit from the beginning—more on this below) has become part of the East Syrians' world view. Science education and a secularization of time is part of this, for to 'keep the Sabbath holy' had a corollary of making the rest of the week secular and part of the consumerist impulses of the business week. Notions of industriousness and national reform were a natural corollary. The final chapter examines the rejection of confessional identity among some East Syrian leaders and their embrace of an ethnic identity tied to Syrian-ness, and eventually the appellation "Assyrian," and looks at the accompanying "auto-ethnography" writing which led to this (i.e., biblical studies and field reports written by "native assistants" in which the imaginative landscape of the missionaries happen to come to mirror the East Syrians' perceived "ancient" connections to biblical, Babylonian and Assyrian figures and contemporary archaeology).

As Becker notes early on, the Neo-Aramaic texts and archives he has worked with in the book, such as the nationalist newspaper

The Star (*Kokhwa*), and *Rays of Light* (*Zahrire d-bahra*) among others, have lain virtually untouched by either scholars of nationalism in the late Ottoman Middle East or by Syriac scholars more generally. As a scholar trained in antiquity, the learning curve Becker has put himself on for this project is not just commendable, but inspiring in that an entirely new and sorely needed field of analysis has been opened up along with a critical frame for it. The book will be of enduring value to students of Syriac culture in antiquity and the middle ages seeking to understand where many of their translations (such as those of Wallace Budge) and their primary source texts (such as those published by Paul Bedjan and Addai Scher) come from, and the world which shaped their transmission. Beyond what the book will do to push Syriac scholars into the study of Neo-Aramaic, the book will be of enduring value to Americanists, historians of missions, postcolonialists, historians of nationalism globally, and historians of Middle Eastern nationalism—many of whom do not have access to materials in Neo-Aramaic. From the outset Becker also offers a robust engagement with the cutting edge of theoretical work on religion, modernity, nationalism and secularism, and thinkers such as Benedict Anderson, Talal Aasad, Partha Chatterjee and Birgit Meyer, as well as scholarship in Evangelical piety and colonialism, such as that of Webb Keane and John Modern. He also incorporates the existing literature on Western missions to East Syrians by scholars who know Aramaic, such as J.F. Coakley's work (centered on Anglicanism), and that of Daniel Wolk (centered on East Syrian migrations out of Mesopotamia after WWI).

But well beyond simply being comprehensive and opening up an archive that has heretofore been untouched, the book's enduring value will be its method of conceptualizing and probing empirically "the nation" and national consciousness as it developed between East Syrians and their reluctantly secularizing and modernist Protestant missionary interlocutors. This is a conception which challenges the secularization thesis, i.e., the narrative that modernity involves a gradual interiorization of religion and its elimination from public life (though this is precisely what happened in some instances with East Syrian nationalism). Becker argues that "religion" itself came into being and was constituted within modernity, but is not coterminous with nationalism. Following other scholars on this theme and referring to "religionization," Becker

remarks that this is "a process that often entails the isolation, codification, and naming of tradition, or traditionalization, which itself plays an important role in the mythologization of the origins of nations, where religion and nation are not discontinuous with one another nor inherently linked as reductive equivalents, but two related instances of the reification of modernity" (12).

However important this conception is, this reviewer finds it linked to something problematic in the book as well. Referring to the use of this conception in Postcolonial scholarship on British India, Becker writes that with this conception "sectarianism and its heightened tensions are no longer to be seen simply as age–old phenomena, but modern articulations which derive *in part* (emphasis mine) from colonial rule and missionary education" (12). While reading through the book one gets a sense that the extreme violence that occurred under late Ottoman rule during WW I against Syriac Christians, and the violence that came from the 2003 US military invasion of Iraq and the ensuing violence against Syriac Christians in the region, which has not ceased, lurks too prominently. It seems to be the case that for Becker American Protestant missionaries not only dislodged Syriac Christians from their organically situated and harmonious place within late Ottoman and early constitutionalist Iran (the first Iranian constitution being formed in 1905), and his book is a cautionary tale focused overly tightly. For Becker it appears that because of the gradual cultivation and reification of a sense of ethnic separateness among East Syrians, coming at the hands of the missionaries, and East Syrians gradually coming to think of themselves as part of a family of nations, linked to other burgeoning, secular democratic polities across the world, he has uncovered the source of violence that occurred under the late Ottomans and much more. This is why he is so insistent that the liberalism of the mission was there from the beginning—to assert it was there from the beginning places the blame squarely on the missionaries and their perceived undue influence. Becker's analysis of these themes within the historical data is often brilliant. He pulls into his own narrative and argument an image from *The Star* in which nationalists conceived the Syrian nation as a photo montage of separate but linked individuals all being drawn into one national reform movement in which isolationist impulses were purged through the new national asceticism taught to East Syrians by nationalist Protestants. Becker informs us that this stems from

Evangelical Protestant notions about the necessity of personal conviction for one's sins. While this may or may not be one of the sources of the coming violence, as a hermeneutical device such as this can be deceptive when it is held up too readily as a way of reading a range of period sources.

I would like therefore to say a few words about how, what is for me is part of an imbalance and a misreading in some cases, can be redressed as the new field of study Becker has masterfully opened moves forward and develops. As there is no extended interest expressed by Becker in either the birth of constitutionalism in Iran (1905), or the changes which were taking place under Ottoman hegemony concerning how "minorities" were being seen, this theme needs to be taken up by scholarship and integrated with Becker's work and archival materials. Another major *lacuna* is the fact that the development of ethnic nationalism and consciousness was occurring in this region both among Christians (among Armenians and Greeks), but also among Muslims who were beginning to see themselves in terms which were cultural, national (Iranian, Egyptian etc.) and modern, and as part of the unraveling of Ottoman imperial rule. Armenian, Assyrian and Greek Christians suffered tremendous violence at the hand of Ottoman forces in the second decade of the 20th century as part of this confluence of changes. The reason that today there exist Eastern Orthodox churches organized around ethnic and national lines (Bulgarian, Georgian, Greek, Romanian, etc., all of whom are in communion with one another), is because of changes which took place in Ottoman policy and the Ottomans' creation of separate Patriarchates, beginning first with Bulgaria in 1872 at the Synod of Constantinople. This was embraced by the Bulgarians and part of what led to their resistance to Ottoman rule. Though the new Bulgarian Patriarchate and the Bulgarian rhetoric surrounding it was condemned by other Orthodox leaders as "phyletism" (love of one's ethnicity), the Bulgarian paradigm soon spread to Greece, Georgia and Romania following the synod. Fully exploring how this intersects with the important groundwork Becker has laid would require reading ability in Ottoman Turkish as well as in Greek and Armenian. There is an inchoate secondary literature on this which deserves to be probed. Non-specialists can also work with specialists and share the cognitive load of this necessary work.

It also bears pointing out that there were parallel developments taking place across the colonial world with regards to national consciousness and Protestant missions. Becker has studied the South Asian (Indian and Indonesian) developments, but American and British Protestant culture and financial influence was a major component within the history of Chinese and East Asian nationalism too. The secular and liberal thought brought to Protestant mission schools there, and which led eventually to China and Taiwan's first modern universities, undercut the religious nature of these institutions, and did so in ways that parallel what occurred in Mesopotamia. China's first modern newspapers came from this confluence of forces as well, and had its national reading and consumption habits shaped by it. Parallels exist with what took place in Ottoman-led Mesopotamia. This cultural encounter between the local and the trans-regional led to the creation of the Nationalist Party (The KMT), still ruling Taiwan today, as well as to the avowedly (then at least) anti-religious ideology of the People's Republic of China. Looking more widely at these developments would suggest, as Becker does at times acknowledge, that "Christianity" is more deeply imbricated within modernity than we often realize. While bringing this to the narrative in Mesopotamia may appear to support Becker's "dislodgement" thesis, it may spur examinations of the wider context too, and encourage researchers to look beyond the missioner-"native assistant" locus, which would thus further reorient and nuance Becker's narrative. One plank within Becker's narrative it would not and should dislodge however is an the understanding that European racial ideologies, coming with Darwinism, and eventually leading to Social Darwinism and contouring the Social Gospel movement's emphasis on bodily comportment, the individual's need for spiritual cleansing, and as part of early 20th century nationalism's emphasis on the cleansing of society as a whole. The YMCA was a major force in interwar Shanghai, and part of the racializing of China's struggle for independence and the otherizing of non-Chinese, and tied to the fomenting of violence against minorities and perceived outsiders which occurred within East Asian nationalisms. Though much of the extreme violence of the early 20th century came as a result of racial ideologies spreading from Europe, within what postcolonial scholars call "colonial modernity," and with its intrinsic connections to Protestant education initiatives, our hermeneutic

should not preclude attribution of agency to the locals. Whether in East Asia or Mesopotamia, it was these locals who took up, worked with, and often helped generate, these representations. They also did so in conjunction with local political and ideological structures which had nothing to do with Protestants and their missions. Getting this balance right with regards to East Syrians will require more than one book. But the fact that the archives and surrounding questions have been so ably opened before us should be duly acknowledged.