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Eileen Ryan, *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

Eileen Ryan's book *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya* focuses on the role of the Catholic Church in the making of Italian colonial and imperial history. It also covers the negotiations between the Italian colonial state and the Sanusiyya socio-religious order (flourishing roughly 1858-1931) in eastern Libya during the period between 1904 and 1931. The author is to be commended for choosing a novel topic and unearthing both archival and published Italian sources that have not been examined before. The book, based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation in history at Columbia University, approaches the topic through the traditional method of diplomatic history.

Ryan's primary sources for the book are Italian colonial state archives and published policies. They include debates and views of colonial officials, military leaders, journalists, diplomats, intelligence officers, spies, clergy, and other advocates of the colonial project and empire. However, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. First, religion as resistance is not relevant to empire-making in Italy, where Ryan argues that the Church joined the colonial project. Second, in Libya, her focus is not on the resistance itself, but rather on the negotiations between the pragmatic Sayyid Muhammad Idris al-Sanusi and the colonial officials. Third, the book, focusing on Italian-Libyan negotiations, does not quite cover the whole country, since the focus is primarily about the negotiations with the Sanusiyya order in Barqa, the eastern region of Libya.

Ryan focuses on the intersection of religion and empire, or more specifically on the role of religion in the making of Italian imperialism (p. 4). She does not single out one central thesis but rather states several points of significance. First, the making of Italian colonialism brought the Catholic Church and the state together after decades of

conflict and tension between them. The Italian state adopted what she terms "religious traditionalism" different from the French and British models of secular colonialism (p. 5). Yet this view of European colonialism in Africa ignores what the British historian Basil Davidson calls "The Gun and the Bible" concept when missionary Christianity was an integral part of empire building, and participated in converting the natives as a strategy to impose imperial domination in Africa. Second, Italian officials assumed they were different and they would win the allegiance of Libyan Muslims, particularly the Sanusi leaders, prior to the conquest and during the period of negotiations between 1904 and 1922. In reality, the overall relationship seems to be ambiguous and uncertain among Italian colonial officials and the Sanusi leaders despite the fact that Idris al-Sanusi agreed to negotiate after the military defeat of his cousin Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif by the British army in the western desert of Egypt in 1915 and 1916. Sayyid Ahmad was reluctant because he wanted to focus on the war against the Italian army, and not to cut off his supply chain from Egypt, but he entered the war due to strong pressure by his Ottoman military allies.

The organization of Ryan's book follows chronologically the various stages of Italian colonial contacts and negotiation with the leaders of the Sanusiyya, with more focus on the period from 1904 to 1931. The introduction and chapter one are general and not very clear. The real start of the book is chapter two, "Crafting Italian Approach to Colonial Role." In this chapter, Ryan unearths new Italian material on the evolution and contestation of Italian colonial thinking about Libya. Chapter three examines Italian colonial policy and the changing policies toward Islam and the Sanusiyya, and completes her analysis of the complex politics of these policies by reviewing the work of Anna Baldinetti in her book *The Origins of the Libyan Nation* (Routledge, 2010). Ryan adds new details on the role of competing figures and groups such as Enrico Insabato, the Italian diplomat, spying informants' networks, propaganda in Egypt, and the early contacts with the Sanusi order. In the early period between 1911 and 1916, Italian expectations for being welcomed and accepted by people in Libya turned out to be delusional. Instead, the native anti-colonial resistance by volunteer-based small armies were well organized, brilliant, and effective. This determined anti-colonial resistance culminated in the Italian defeat in 1915 at Gasr Bu Hadi—what Libyans call al-Gardabiyya—by Libyan resistance groups from all three regions of the country. Over 500 Italian soldiers and colonial troops were killed, and the career of Colonel Miani, the Italian commander, was ruined. Consequently, Ital-

ian control was reduced to a few coastal cities, and the Libyan resistance controlled most of the interior and the hinterland. The Italian colonial state was forced to negotiate, and in turn, the Sanusi leadership, after its military defeat by the British army along the Egyptian border, was ready to negotiate under the new, accommodating leader of the order, Sayyid Idris al-Sanusi. This is the historical context that paved the way for the Italian and Sanusi negotiations, but Ryan could have done more to emphasize it. In short, the two sides had a mutual interest to negotiate based on the new military realities pushing the Italian state, the Sanusi leadership, and the British colonial interest in keeping their security in Egypt, to reach the agreements known as the Accords of 'Akramah, al-Rajma, and Bu Maryam. These Accords led to the creation of a Sanusi Emirate and the recognition of Sayyid Idris as an emir of the interior of Barqa, with a capital in the city of Ajdabiya. Ryan's treatment of the colonial visions and debates are valuable, but the analysis of the Sanusiyya tends towards orientalist. Ryan seems to uncritically accept Eurocentric and colonial sources, thereby reducing the Sanusiyya order to an essentialist model of a Sufi *tariqa*. Her critique of E. E. Evans-Pritchard's work on the Sanusiyya thus misses the point; despite the fact he was working for the British colonial state, he viewed the dynamics of the order from within and realized its innovation and complexity.

Chapter four is interesting and presents new material on an overlooked topic: the role of railways in colonial policy. The author argues that Italian colonial and military officials were eager to build railways for logistical and mobility reasons, and Sayyid Idris found this project beneficial for development of the region as well. Yet resisting tribes and other Libyan leaders objected to this project, and consequently only a few railway lines were completed. This cooperation with the Sanussiya ended when the Fascist party took power in Rome and decided to dismiss all previous accords and agreements.

Chapter five examines the violent fascist policy in Libya after 1922, which ultimately decimated the local population by 1934. Yet Ryan does not specify the impact of this policy on Libyan society, including the loss of one third of its population, and the forced exile of over 60,000 people. This genocidal colonial history is not recognized directly in the book, and the section on the concentration camps is mentioned only in passing. The new material in this chapter is the role of Luigi Federzoni, a fascist minister of the colonies between 1922-1924, and 1926-1928. According to Ryan, he played an early and

significant role in making the policy of the destruction of the Sanusi order and the resistance (pp. 136-138). Federzoni's role has not been recognized before. Finally, the book's conclusion is brief, and somewhat disappointing, as it does not address the larger significance of the material and the period under investigation, nor connect with the original questions and arguments which the book raise, and their implications for the study of Italian imperial and Fascist colonization.

The author made a choice to read the Italian colonial project through the top-down method of diplomatic history and language. She applies categories such as elite versus masses, pacification, Bedouins, tribalism, and modernizing mission, often without contextualization. This is surprising, especially after four decades of critical debates on orientalism, colonial, and postcolonial scholarship in general, which have replaced elitist and colonial diplomatic history, and examined instead the process and discourses of the production of colonial knowledge, power, class, gender, and subaltern agency. The author seems to ignore these critiques of colonial racism and the invention of race and the nation-state as a model.

Thus, this work tends towards problematic in both methods and application. It examines a new topic—that of the role of the church and colonial debates in the making of colonial policy in Libya—but uses uncritical colonial language, assumptions, and methods of reading colonial archival material. One has to raise some critical questions: Is Italian society just the view by the elite and should it include the role of regions, class, gender and culture? Is colonialism in Libya simply a modernization or a racist genocidal experience? There is a difference between studying and accepting Italian colonial perceptions, fantasies, and policy on Libya as facts, and the study of Libyan history from the point of view of the Libyan people. There are three main problems of method and language in the book. First, Ryan reads and accepts the colonial archives as facts without critical context, but rejects oral history. Inevitably then real history is Italian colonial history. Some of the blurbs for the book seem to share this view as well. What is missing is a questioning of the process of making the archives and the specific choice for organizing and using them for the sake of domination and control. For example, she accepts the colonial language of pacification and pacified (pp. 80, 81, 149, 162-163). Colonial agreements for the partition of Africa including Tripoli and Libya are seen as international agreements (pp. 4, 20), when they were of course not. Second, while the author not only accepts colonial archives as facts, she questions

the use of oral history in Libya organized by the Libyan Studies Center. This is a troubling choice, knowing that the Libyan Studies Center has conducted one of the most impressive projects of collecting oral history in Africa and the world, under the supervision of Professor Jan Vansina, the father of modern oral history. The collected oral histories of some 15,000 Libyan resistance fighters have been transcribed and published in 43 volumes. However, Ryan chose to cite only six volumes. Furthermore, Ryan raises many problems with oral history and undermines its value (pp. 177-181). By doing so, she unintentionally confirms colonial hostility to native views of history. In one note, she cites an article critical of oral history without questioning the motives behind it; it is by an Israeli scholar critical of the Palestinian oral history project (p. 181). As another example, Ryan states that she visited the Libyan Studies Center in Tripoli, but admits that most of the history is on military battles, and in dialectal Arabic that is hard to understand (p. 174). If one cannot understand Libyan Arabic sources, then one cannot read them, which is a different challenge, and seems to be a case of dismissing subaltern voices. As well, Libya as a name is a colonial Italian invention. Up until 1911, the region was Ṭrābulus al-Gharb, as an Ottoman province. In addition, the use of *tariqa* and Bedouin are misleading, even orientalist, terms that do not reflect the changing reality of living culture, social movements, and peasant and kinship organizations. Ryan's book has opened new doors for the study of religion in the making of Italian empire. Nevertheless, the field is still waiting for further critical scholarship on colonial, orientalist, Eurocentric assumptions, and diplomatic Italian fantasies of empire.

