

SARAH BAKKER KELLOGG, *Sonic Icons: Relation, Recognition, and Revival in a Syriac World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2025). Pp. 308. \$125.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9781531509132.

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In *Sonic Icons: Relation, Recognition, and Revival in a Syriac World*, Sarah Bakker Kellogg engages with how first-, second-, and third-generation Syriac Orthodox women navigate between their desire to maintain Syriac Orthodoxy and the requirements of their new Dutch environment. There are approximately 25,000 Syriac Orthodox in the Netherlands. The book highlights the lives and reflections of members of female choirs, a key aspect of Syriac Orthodox revival. The core of Syriac Christianity, according to Bakker Kellogg, is liturgy, which not only constitutes the heart of group cohesion but also works as “a site of reproductive power, in which irreducible relations and the political identities staked upon those relations are generated” (2). The argument builds on the idea that, within liturgy, sonic icons are “a way of doing theology in a variety of domains, inside and outside of church, that creatively and dynamically produces the relations that make the Suryoye a people, and in the process shape the Syriac world across space and time” (18). In addition to Syriac covenantal theology’s influence, the creation of such group identity and shared understanding is informed by Dutch immigration politics and the (ongoing) legacy of violence and displacement in the Middle East. In chapter 5 members of the audience at a public event organized at the Monastery Mor Ephrem best summarized the issues at stake in this book: “How do we reconcile this insistence that Christianity is something we can choose with the understanding we all grew up with that it is a tradition into which we were born and to which we are tied by bonds of kinship and social belonging?” (166).

This ethnographic work draws from in-person fieldwork in the Netherlands and digital ethnography in broader Assyrian/Syriac public discourse. Bakker Kellogg uses observant participation as her

primary methodology, as exemplified by her attending weekly lessons in Syriac at a local monastery, visiting a daycare for elderly women, and participating in several public events organized by the diocese. Most of the study builds on interactions with young women and their families.

Sonic Icons offers a valuable addition to the growing scholarship on Syriac Christianity because it adopts the self-understanding of Syriac Christianity and its members, therefore centering liturgy (and its larger ramifications) and demonstrating how ritual, theology, and everyday life overlap and inform Syriac Christian identity. Bakker Kellogg situates her argument in the larger context of Dutch migration policies and the different historical trajectories (of secularism, in particular) in the Middle East. However, at times, the book would have benefited from a clearer, more explicit structure and writing.

The monograph comprises a prelude, six chapters interrupted by an interlude, as well as a postlude. Since there is no formal introduction, the reader relies on chapter 1 for introduction to the context. The chapter begins with recounting the Mor Ephrem Monastery's establishment in the 1970s in the Netherlands as an avenue to discuss the emergence of a distinct Syriac Orthodox Church in antiquity. Bakker Kellogg highlights the importance of liturgy as "simultaneously a philosophical category, a ritualized practice of collective worship, and a set of social-emotional relationships infused with the power to shape political imaginaries, binding far-flung communities into a connected, coherent, global formation—the Syriac world" (6). This conception raises issues for the book's Dutch context whose implications become clearer as the book progresses.

The second chapter discusses the gender dimension of a theology centered around liturgy. In particular, Bakker Kellogg describes the female practitioners of this Syriac theology who revive the proto-monastic practice of the "Daughters of Covenant" as established by Mor Ephrem. Chapter three is concerned with the sonic dimension of liturgy, which produced in Syriac Orthodoxy the Beth Gazo, a tradition of different schools of singing that developed in eight different geographic areas and constitutes a "sonic map of ancient migration and contemporary loss" (89). This chapter distinguishes the Beth Gazo from the Calvinist understanding of music as having a global outreach.

By contrast, chapter 4 engages with the various practices undertaken by young Syriac Orthodox women beyond singing in a choir to "save Syriac Christianity" in a Dutch context; such tactics include motherhood (and thus transmitting an ethos) or speaking

Turoyo to their children. All of these aspects illustrate the fluidity between and inseparability of everyday life, ritual, and theology. At the heart, these women experience a tension best illustrated by the Mary-Martha parable: "They want to be like Mary, sitting next to Jesus in the story to listen to him speak, but they are also Martha in the kitchen, for that is the work that makes the conversation in the front of the house possible" (141). In Syriac Christianity, the tasks of Mary and Martha complement each other in a soteriological framework. However, given the Netherlands' cultural emphasis on a mother's responsibility to raise moral citizens, motherhood gains a particular salience that can become at odds with Syriac Christianity.

Chapter 5 opens with one of the Syriac Orthodox female research participants giving a speech at the Thirtieth Session of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations where she uses the term "Aramean" despite her earlier rejection of the Aramean-Assyrian debate. This shift stems from the fact that Syriac Orthodox Christians in Europe are "invisible" (in chapter 6 we learn that Syriac Christianity is actually not recognized as a separate category in the Dutch legal system). For the book's research participants, Syriac Orthodoxy produces an understanding of the human being that is "entirely inaudible, illegible, and incomprehensible" to "mainstream secularist and Western Christian," thus causing a deep identity crisis (188). Some of the participants therefore engage in a reconfiguration which entails a distinction between religious and ethnic affiliation, hence the use of the terms "Aramean" or "Assyrian."

Chapter 6 addresses the issue of misrecognition—Syriac Christians being mistaken as Muslims in the Netherlands—which the author connects with the issue of race, again highlighting how different visions of socialization in Syriac Christianity clash with Dutch visions of socialization and "reproductive power."

The postlude reaffirms the challenge secular modernity, heavily influenced by Calvinist visions, poses to second- and third-generation Syriac Orthodox as "something to ward of not simply for its Godlessness but for its threat to the rhythms of the liturgical world order that makes being Syriac Orthodox possible in a sense they understand to be" (230).

Sonic Icons is a fascinating book about a direly understudied branch of Christianity and as such is a must-read for scholars working on global Christianity, the anthropology of Christianity, Assyrian/Syriac studies, as well as European studies. It highlights the need to consider the mental worlds and sociability of migrant communities. More importantly, putting liturgy and all its

ramifications center stage all while contrasting it with the dominant (Calvinist) culture is an especially beneficial approach that can be adapted to other case studies.