A New Crusade or an Old One?

Sharkey, H.J.

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HEATHER J. SHARKEY

Scholars frequently acknowledge the force of political Islam in shaping the Muslim societies of Africa and Asia, but seldom consider the role that Christian activism has played in these societies, particularly in the context of Western imperialism and globalization. Of central importance here is the history of Christian missionary attempts to convert Muslims in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a period when the British, French, and Dutch colonial powers lent their protection to European and American evangelical groups that operated within their overseas empires.

In the late twentieth century, many Muslim thinkers reflected on the Christian evangelical enterprise and identified it as part of a modern crusade against Islam.[1] Before the First World War, many Christian missionaries themselves would have agreed with this assessment. In 1910, for example, a British missionary in Iran embraced the crusading ideal in an evangelical manual entitled *Crusaders of the Twentieth Century, or the Christian Missionary and the Muslim*. Asserting that Muslims were 'victims of unconscious ignorance', he urged his missionary colleagues to act and evangelize 'for pity's sake'.[2] A year later, a British missionary in Algiers used less forgiving language to exhort her peers, by declaring that 'there are other plans besides frontal attack, other methods beyond random blows at the rock-wall. We have to find the cleavage, and get the powder in!'[3]

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Pamphlet on the home of Kamil Effendi Mansour

Christian missions to Muslims

Militant rhetoric of this kind was typical in a period when American and British evangelical Protestants, in particular, proclaimed a goal of 'evangelization of the world in this generation' and anticipated rapid conversions. Work among Muslims was part of a larger global scheme for proselytism that also included Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, practitioners of local religions, and even 'Oriental' Christians (meaning Copts, Armenians, and other adherents of Eastern churches whom Western missionaries often described as practitioners of a corrupted and enfeebled Christian faith).

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American Mission in Egypt (United Presbyterian)

British and American missionaries had been operating in India, Egypt, and greater Syria since the first half of the nineteenth century, but their work among Muslims intensified and expanded in the 1880s and 1890s. At a time when the global evangelical movement was growing dramatically, missionaries adopted the language of high imperialism by frequently invoking metaphors of morally justified conquest and battle-readiness. For example, following on the heels of the Anglo-Egyptian 'Reconquest' of the Sudan in 1898, British and American missionaries entered the region to bring Christianity to Muslims while voicing plans to 'avenge' Gordon (the British general who had died years earlier in Khartoum at the hands of Mahdist Islamic revolutionaries).[4] Surveying western and eastern Africa more broadly, evangelical groups braced themselves for a war against Islam, 'their avowed antagonist' (to borrow the words of one 1885 source), in the contest for African souls.[5]

Meanwhile, critical and adversarial attitudes toward Islam also surfaced in the writings of missionary scholars who cultivated reputations as experts on Islam and affiliated themselves with universities and theological colleges. One of the most prominent and strident of these was Samuel M. Zwemer (1867–1952), an American minister of the Dutch Reformed Church who established missions in Iraq and Bahrain, organized international missionary conferences, founded and edited the journal *The Moslem World*, and published several books including, for example, a study of the Islamic apostasy principle which deterred easy conversion to Christianity.[6] Zwemer consistently portrayed Islam as a fanatical, backward faith that was incompatible with modernity, and predicted its ultimate collapse. 'Like all other non-Christian systems and philosophies', he wrote, 'Islam is a dying religion.' Declaring that 'when the crescent wanes the Cross will prove dominant', Zwemer averred that successful Christian evangelization was imminent.[7]

Despite a bold vision for expansion, years of steady work in African and Asian cities and villages, and the predictions of missionaries like Zwemer, Christian evangelists gained relatively few Muslim converts, although they wrote proudly and frequently about their success stories. Among the latter were converts like Kamil Mansur, a Muslim-born, Azhar-educated Egyptian who in the 1930s became a Christian evangelist and preacher in Cairo. Such exceptional cases aside, however, missionaries had greater success in 'converting' indigenous Christians such as Egyptian Copts, many of whom went on to form the independent Egyptian Evangelical Church under the aegis of the American Presbyterians.

The social impact of missionaries on Muslim communities was nevertheless much greater than conversion rates suggest, for two reasons. First, missionaries founded schools and clinics that contributed to the development of modern educational and medical infrastructures. In the process, they catered to and intensively interacted with Muslim men, women, and children from across the social spectrum. Second, missionary work galvanized Muslim intellectuals to resist Christian evangelism and to question Western cultural influences. At the same time, it inspired some Muslim leaders to establish Islamist organizations that could supplant Christian missions in the provision of charity and social services. This trend was particularly visible in Egypt, where, for example, a Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA) emerged to rival the American- and Canadian-backed branches of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in offering athletic, educational, and recreational services to urban males. More significantly for Egypt and the wider Muslim world in the long run, Hasan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, citing opposition to Christian missionaries as a major grievance and mobilizing force.

Beginning in the 1930s, many British and American Protestant groups began to scale back their missions to Muslims throughout the Islamic world and increasingly emphasized the non-evangelical dimensions of their educational and medical work. Depression-era financial stringencies, combined with growing doubts about the merits and ethics of the global evangelical enterprise, played a role in prompting some of these changes, but so did increasing pressure from Muslim nationalists who demanded rights of access for Muslim children to mission schools without obligatory Christian study. During the interwar era, institutions such

as Egypt's American University in Cairo (founded by Charles R. Watson, a second-generation Presbyterian missionary and author of a work entitled *Egypt and the Christian Crusade*[8]) responded to nationalist pressures by downplaying or eliminating their evangelical connections while highlighting their general goal of community service. These trends accelerated during and after decolonization as Christian missionaries lost the protection afforded by the European empires – a change that made the cultivation and retention of local goodwill a necessity as never before and exposed missionary institutions to the possibility of nationalization.

Muslim responses to missions

Judging from the anti-missionary treatises that have constituted a thriving genre in Arabic during the post-colonial period, many Muslim thinkers have regarded Christian evangelism and its legacies as a grave and continuing threat to the integrity of Muslim societies in a westernized, globalized world. At the same time they have asserted close and continuing historical connections between a triad of *tabshir*, *isti'mar*, and *ishtiraq* – that is, Christian evangelism (often also rendered as *tansir*, Christianization), Western imperialism (in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions), and Orientalist scholarship on Islam and Muslims.[9] A general assumption in many of these works is that Christians and Muslims remain locked as rivals and antagonists in a kind of civilizational clash, thereby showing that the views of Samuel Huntington and his supporters find a reciprocal Islamocentric expression.[10]

While some Arabic writers have merely diagnosed the evangelical threat or discussed its historical workings, others have offered advice on how to respond in its wake. Thinking globally, some have urged Islamic mission (*da'wa*) to counteract Christian evangelism, that is, by reversing the 'contest' for souls. Thinking locally, others have urged Arab national governments to police more rigorously Western educational institutions that enrol Muslim students. Governments must ensure that Muslim students receive Islamic education and must try to protect them from dangerous Western influences and practices, such as mixed-sex socializing for unmarried teens and young adults. These educational prescriptions pertain both to international schools that cater mainly to expatriate children as well as to Western-style institutions that have historical roots in missionary enterprises.[11]

Concerned with the gravity of the Christian threat, one Gulf Arab writer has called for more isolationist measures and policies. He prescribes the following measures: Arab élites (who often value English-language education for their children) must stop patronizing Christian schools and should avoid socializing with non-Muslims in general, and Arab governments should shut down churches that serve expatriates, institute policies against hiring non-Muslims as guest workers, and discourage or otherwise restrict Muslim men from marrying Western Christian women. While such marriages are permissible under Islamic law, this author notes, they run the risk of Westernizing children within the precincts of their own homes.[12]

Among Muslim writers, the most widely excoriated and despised missionary is the aforementioned Samuel M. Zwemer, author of *The Disintegration of Islam*. Zwemer died a half century ago, but many Arabic works discuss him as if he were still alive and present him as the archetypal modern crusader, forging imperialism, Orientalism, and evangelism into a pernicious anti-Islamic alliance.[13] Strikingly, Zwemer retains the admiration of some Christian evangelical groups today who hail him as an 'Apostle to Islam' and as 'the greatest [modern] missionary to the Islamic world'; for these audiences, a couple of his books remain in print.[14] A controversial and confrontational character during his lifetime, Zwemer remains divisive even in death and in some sense embodies the polarizing idea of the clash of cultures.[15]

Consign crusades to the past

In these Arabic works that discuss Christian evangelism, Muslim writers insist that the crusades are far from over. They argue that when the original crusades proved to be a military failure, Christian powers later adopted evangelization as a cultural weapon instead, aiming to demoralize Muslims and thereby to facilitate their subjugation.[16] Since the work of Christian missionaries, thus construed, was a form of cultural power-mongering, one writer has even suggested that the ideology of Western evangelists should be described not as *masihiyya* (Christianity) but rather as *salibiyya* (crusaderism): a political strategy in the guise of religion.[17]

The recent crusading rhetoric emanating from the United States, before and during the Anglo-American Iraqi invasion, may seem to lend credence to claims about a persistent Western crusader-imperialist mentality. Consider, for example, the US military programme to develop a 'crusader artillery system' and President George W. Bush's post-11 September invocation (later retracted) of a 'crusade' against Muslim terrorists and their sponsors.[18] Consider, too, debates about the political Jesus occurring in the American arena. Rejecting narrowly pacifist interpretations of his career (with implications for the Iraq conflict), one conservative think-tank analyst affirmed in a recent *New York Times* editorial that Jesus was also, as the Bible declares, 'the Lion of the Tribe of Judah…who judges and wages war'.[19] One thing is certain: among both Muslim and Christian audiences, the frequent use of militant Christian metaphors in the current political milieu – for example, among some American evangelicals who have been exhorting their followers to direct 'prayer missiles' and 'cruise and scud prayers' to defeat the Iraqis in war – can only worsen perceptions of global, religious-based conflict.[20]

There are at least two lessons to be learned from the history of modern Christian missions to Muslims. The first is that one cannot understand political Islam without recognizing its tension-fraught relationship to political Christianity and to the legacies of Western imperialism. The second is that practical attempts to promote communal coexistence and interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims must reckon with this imperialist history while seeking to consign crusades to the past.

Heather J. Sharkey is an assistant professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. She is the author of Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Her current research examines the history of Christian evangelism among Egyptian Muslims during the heyday of British imperialism.*
E-mail: hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

Notes

1. See, for example, Muhammad al-Bahi, *al-Fikr al-islami al-hadith wa-silatuhu bil-isti'maral-gharbi*, 8th ed. (Cairo, 1975) and Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Julaynd, *al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabshir* (Cairo, 1999).
2. W.A. Rice, *Crusaders of the Twentieth Century, or the Christian Missionary and the Muslim: An Introduction to Work among Muhammadans* (London, 1910), p. xliv.
3. Lilias Trotter, 'The Ministry of the Press', in Annie van Sommer & Samuel M. Zwemer, eds., *Daylight in the Harem: A New Era for Moslem Women* (New York, 1911), p. 149.
4. Worried that this project would stoke Muslim opposition to their fledgling colonial regime, British officials tried to divert Christian missionary groups to animist southern regions – a move that had long-term consequences for Sudanese North-South dynamics.
5. See Heather J. Sharkey, 'Christians among Muslims: The Church Missionary Society in the Northern Sudan', *Journal of African History* 43 (2002): 51–75.
6. Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Law of Apostasy in Islam: Answering the Question Why There Are So Few Moslem Converts, and Giving Examples of Their Moral Courage and Martyrdom* (London, 1924).
7. Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Disintegration of Islam* (New York, 1916), pp. 7, 9–10.
8. Charles R. Watson, *Egypt and the Christian Crusade* (Philadelphia, 1907).
9. See, for example, Ibrahim Khalil Ahmad, *al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabshir wa-silatuhuma bil-imbiraliyya al-'alamiyya* (Cairo, 1973); Muhammad al-Dahhan, *Quwa al-sharr al-mutahalifa: al-ishtiraq, al-tabshir, al-isti'mar wa-mawqifuha min al-islam wa-l-muslimin* (Mansura, 1986).
10. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).
11. See, for example, Hasan Makki, *Ab'adal-tabshir al-masihi fi al-'asimaal-qawmiyya* (Omdurman, 1990).
12. 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Ibrahim al-Askar, *al-Tansir wa-muhawalatuhu fi bilad al-khalij al-'arabi* (Riyadh, 1993).
13. See, for example, 'Abd al-Wudud Shalabi, *Afiqu ayyuha al-muslimun qabla an tadfa'u al-jizya* (Jidda, 1981).
14. http://answering-islam.org/Index/Z/zwemer.html; http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/ARCHIVEF/06/daily-06-28-2001.shtml
15. Because of their implications for Coptic-Muslim tensions in contemporary Egypt, the controversial tactics of Zwemer even earn a reference in Saad Eddin Ibrahim et al., *The Copts of Egypt*, Minority Rights Group International (London, 1996), p. 13. His name is misrendered in this text as 'Zoimer' – clearly a sign that it was transliterated from an Arabic source.
16. See, for example, Ahmad Sa'd al-Din al-Basati, *al-Tabshir wa-athruhu fi al-bilad al-'arabiyyaal-islamiyya* (Cairo, 1989), p. 3.
17. al-Julaynd, *al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabshir* (1999), p.8.
18. The US military's crusader artillery system was scheduled for completion in 2008, though its production was halted in 2002 because presidential advisors deemed it too old-fashioned and favoured funding for satellite-guided weapons instead. See 'Crusaders Belong to the Past', *The Economist*, 18 May 2002, pp. 30–1.
19. Joseph Loconte, 'The Prince of Peace Was a Warrior, Too', *The New York Times*, 28 January 2003, A21. For a critical examination of the Christian dimensions behind the current political thinking of American leaders vis-à-vis the Middle East, see Jackson Lears, 'How a War Became a Crusade', *The New York Times*, 11 March 2003, A25.
20. Deborah Caldwell, 'Should Christian Missionaries Heed the Call in Iraq?', *The New York Times*, 6 April 2003, WK14.