

MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES

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WHY PROTESTANT CHURCHES? THE AMERICAN BOARD AND THE EASTERN CHURCHES: MISSION AMONG 'NOMINAL' CHRISTIANS (1820-70)

by H. L. MURRE-VAN DEN BERG

INTRODUCTION

In Palestine, Syria, the provinces of Asia Minor, Armenia, Georgia, and Persia, though Mohammedan countries, there are many thousands of Jews, and many thousands of Christians, at least in name. But the whole mingled population is in a state of deplorable ignorance and degradation, - destitute of the means of divine knowledge, and bewildered with vain imaginations and strong delusions.

THUS wrote Rufus Anderson, in his *History of the Missions to the Oriental Churches*, when he looked back on the start of mission work in 1819.¹ Anderson had been the foreign secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions for more than thirty years (1832-66), and his words illustrate the opinions held by many of the missionaries as well as administrators of the American Board. Such opinions inspired the American Board, consisting mainly of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, to start mission work among the Christians and Jews in Western Asia. It is their work among the Eastern Christians that this paper examines.²

Earlier research into the history of Protestant mission work among the Eastern Churches usually stressed that despite the fact that this mission work was inspired by a rather negative evaluation of the state in which the Eastern Churches found themselves, its missionaries at the same

¹ Rufus Anderson, *History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches* (Boston, 1873 [I], 1872 [II]; 2nd edn Boston, 1875 [III and IV], same pagination).

² In the following I will use the designation 'Eastern' to refer to all ancient Christian Churches of Western Asia, including the Chalcedonian Churches of the Greek tradition as well as the non-Chalcedonian 'Oriental' Churches, like the Armenian and Syrian-Orthodox Church. The Church of the East, representing a separate non-Chalcedonian tradition, is included too.

time strongly believed in the possibility of reform. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that such authors as Mary Walker in her article of 1976 and Peter Kawerau in his fundamental work, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen*, of 1958, single out the missionaries' negative opinions of the Eastern Churches as being the primary reason for the emergence of separate Protestant Churches. David Kerr, in his well-balanced article on proselytism in West Asia, argues along the same lines, although he clearly is aware of other elements which played a role.³ Recent research by Habib Badr on the American Board Mission in Beirut gives a much more detailed picture of the developments leading to a separate Protestant Church. He describes a range of other elements which might have influenced this process.⁴ His findings in many ways are confirmed by my own research into the history of the mission in Urmia in northwestern Persia, and I was therefore encouraged to reconsider the matter of the emergence of Protestant Churches alongside the Eastern Churches.

In the following I will present an overview of three missions of the American Board in Western Asia: in Beirut, Constantinople (as Istanbul was consistently called by missionaries and Eastern Christians alike), and Urmia. I hope to shed some new light on the factors that gave rise to the formation of Protestant Churches in Western Asia, and in this way to contribute to the history of Protestantism in the Middle East within the context of the history of Protestant missions on the one hand and of the Eastern Churches on the other.

BEIRUT

After the American Board was established in 1810 and missionaries had been sent to India and the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), the mission in Syria, then part of the Ottoman Empire, became the first of the Board's missions in Western Asia. Its missionaries arrived in 1819, worked in Jerusalem for a while, and after a few years decided to settle in Beirut.

³ Mary A. Walker, 'The American Board and the Oriental Churches. A Brief Survey of Policy Based on Official Documents', in *International Review of Mission*, 56 (1976), pp. 214-23; Peter Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen. Ursprung und Anfang der Amerikanischen Mission unter den Nationalkirchen Westasiens* (Berlin, 1958); and David A. Kerr, 'Mission and Proselytism: A Middle East Perspective', *IBMR*, 20/1 (1996), pp. 12-22.

⁴ Habib Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians": The Policy and Practice of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and its Missionaries Concerning Eastern Churches which led to the Organization of a Protestant Church in Beirut (1819-1848)' (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton, NJ, 1992).

It was here that they were able to establish good relations with some local clergy and with other members of the various Eastern Christian communities present in this city. The missionaries set up an educational system, distributed religious pamphlets, started translation work, and set up a printing press. The actual evangelizing work was done mainly by what they called 'conversational preaching', that is, informal exposition of the Scriptures in the missionaries' homes or in other meeting places.⁵

Almost all the Eastern Churches were represented in Beirut. The missionaries met with Greek Orthodox of the Chalcedonian patriarchate of Antioch, Greek Catholics, also called Melkites, Maronites, Armenians, and Roman Catholics of the Latin rite. They further came in contact with the Arabic-speaking Muslim population and with Druze communities.

Some of the missionaries had some previous knowledge of the history and doctrines of the Eastern Churches. William Gooddell, who started work in Beirut in 1823 and later was transferred to Constantinople, had written a paper on the Armenian Church in 1819, while he was still a student in Andover Theological Seminary.⁶ Later missionaries among the Eastern Christians could make use of the work of Eli Smith and H. G. O. Dwight, who published their *Missionary Researches in Armenia* in 1834.⁷ Naturally, the first generations of missionaries had had hardly any personal encounters with Eastern Christians before leaving America.

In Beirut, opposition to Protestant mission work arose almost immediately. This opposition was located mainly within Churches with Roman Catholic connections, such as the Maronite and Melkite Churches.⁸ In 1825, Jonas King, one of the American missionaries, had his strongly anti-Roman-Catholic 'Farewell Letter' translated into

⁵ For the history of this mission, including further biographical references, see Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"'; Kawerau, *Amerika*; and A. L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901. A Study of Educational, Literary and Religious Work* (Oxford, 1966).

⁶ E. D. G. Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire; or, Memoirs of Rev. William Gooddell, D.D., Late Missionary of the A.B.C.F.M. at Constantinople* (New York, 1876), pp. 64-5: 'The History and Present State of Armenia as a Missionary Field'.

⁷ Eli Smith and H. G. O. Dwight, *Missionary Researches in Armenia: Including a Journey through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia, with a Visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas* (London, 1834). For this work, Smith and Dwight made use of the work of the Maronite scholar J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* (Rome, 1719), which was one of the most extensive studies on Eastern Christianity then available.

⁸ Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', pp. 90-4; Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East* (New York, 1910 [repr. New York, 1970]), p. 187.

Arabic. In a rather polemical tone King separated himself from the Roman Catholic, Maronite, and other Eastern Churches. Hereafter, opposition from these quarters increased. In later years, especially after 1834, a decidedly less polemical tone was assumed by missionaries such as Eli Smith, cited above. Opposition, however, did not cease.⁹ In the thirties, one of the early converts, the Maronite priest Asad as-Shidyak, was put in prison by the Maronite patriarch and subsequently died in the dungeon of a monastery in 1839.¹⁰ In 1909, Julius Richter, in one of the earliest works on the Protestant missions in Western Asia, saw this incident as a clear step on the way to the formation of Protestant Churches. He concluded his historical description: 'This experience had the advantage or disadvantage, according to one's point of view, of leaving the Protestant Mission in no doubt as to whether a reformation of these Oriental Churches from within, with the help of their authorities, was possible.'¹¹ However, this interpretation is not without its difficulties. Since Shidyak died in 1839 and a separate church did not come into existence until 1848, it clearly was not the death of Shidyak, nor, for that matter, other measures that the Eastern clergy took, which made the missionaries change their mind about the formation of Protestant Churches. For that, we have to look in another direction.

In 1827, a mission church had been established in Beirut. This body was intended to function as the church of the missionaries themselves, not as a church for local Christians. Surprisingly, however, one of the reasons for converting the missionaries' fellowship into a regular church had been the request of two Armenian converts to be admitted to the Protestant worship.¹² What made their case peculiar was the fact that they had left the Armenian Church well before the missionaries had arrived in the country. Their admittance to the mission church, therefore, was not seen as a deviation from the earlier policy of working towards reform of the Eastern Churches. In the same period, the missionaries advised other converts, or potential converts, to stay in their original Churches as long as possible. In the eyes of the missionaries, these early converts were to be the initiators of reform within the Eastern Churches. None but the Easterners themselves could effectively challenge these old institutions. In the early thirties,

⁹ Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', pp. 119-25.

¹⁰ Kawerau, *Amerika*, pp. 488-91.

¹¹ Richter, *History*, pp. 188-9.

¹² Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', pp. 100-3.

this policy was further developed by the missionaries Smith and Goodell. At that time it was supported also by foreign secretary Rufus Anderson in Boston, on behalf of the Prudential Committee of the American Board. He agreed that it was not the missionaries' duty to attack ecclesiastical structures or practices, that is, the 'outward forms' of the Christians amongst whom they were working. Such a method would only incite opposition. Rather, the missionaries should labour towards a revival of the heart, a revival worked by the Holy Spirit. A reform of the outer forms would follow in due time. Ecclesiology was made *subservient* to soteriology -- so Badr summarizes the opinions of the *missionaries*.¹³

Before these idealistic ideas could be put into practice, the missionaries were overtaken by the events of the early forties. In a politically unstable situation, Druze communities were exploring the possibilities of conversion to Christianity. The missionaries were very reluctant to accede to their wishes, because they feared that other than purely spiritual reasons were at stake. And while the missionaries tried to keep the Druzes from associating themselves too much with the Protestant missionaries, they hardly could report any successful conversions from the side of the Eastern Christians. Similar difficulties in the Greek mission made Anderson want to visit the mission fields in Western Asia in person. This visit took place in the years 1843 and 1844. By that time, Anderson's ideas on mission policy had ripened. Although he still held to the possibility of reform, he more and more began to equate the missions to Eastern Churches with those in other places, to the missions among the 'heathen'. This included a growing emphasis on a 'native' church of 'native' converts, led by a 'native' ministry. Ultimately, the implementation of such a policy would lead to Protestant Churches being formed alongside the Eastern Churches. If that perhaps was not feasible for the time being, at least something like what Anderson called 'formal preaching' (in a public place, with a congregation - thus: opposed to the 'conversational' preaching current in Beirut) should be introduced. He further stressed that preaching and evangelization should always have priority over other activities of a mission, such as education and printing. Educational and literary activities were allowed only as far as they contributed to the education of a local Protestant *clergy*.¹⁴

¹³ Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', p. 167.

¹⁴ Rufus Anderson, 'Report to the Prudential Committee of a Visit to the Missions in the

Anderson's visit to Beirut convinced both himself and the missionaries that *here* the time for reform was over:

It was agreed, that the grand aim of our mission is of course the converting of men to God; that the preaching of the gospel is the great, divinely appointed means to this end; that whenever and wherever there are small companies of natives ready to make a credible profession of piety, they are to be recognized as churches.¹⁵

Thus the way was paved for the formation of a Protestant Church in Syria. Political disturbances and lack of potential church members, that is, of people 'truly converted', however, made the missionaries hesitate to take further steps. It was only in 1848 that a small church of about sixteen members was constituted. Badr suggests that without further pressure from the Board and the foreign secretary the formation of a Protestant church in Beirut probably would have taken place even later than *that*.¹⁶ Ussama Makdisi, in an interesting article on the introduction of 'Evangelical Modernity' in Syria, suggests that the missionaries' reluctance to form 'native' churches should be explained by their distrust of the Syrian converts. Although it cannot be denied that the missionaries in Beirut were rather cautious about the supposed conversions of their followers, I would say that Badr's work clearly shows that the missionaries' sincere wish for reformation of the Eastern Churches must be considered to be of at least equal importance in the formation of Protestant Churches.¹⁷

In summary, I would suggest that in the case of Beirut, it was the policy of the Board on the Eastern Churches, as advocated by Anderson, which played a decisive role in the formation of a Protestant Church. Opposition from the Eastern Churches did not so much stimulate the formation of a separate church, as effectively limit the number of potential converts. The opinions of the missionaries

Levant', also 'A Letter to the Committee from the Rev. Dr. Hawes' (Boston, 1844). On Anderson and the influence of his mission policy, see R. Pierce Beaver, 'Rufus Anderson 1796-1880. To Evangelize, Not Civilize', in Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote *et al.*, *Mission Legacies. Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement* (Maryknoll, NY, 1994), pp. 548-53, and William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 62-90.

¹⁵ Anderson, 'Report', p. 25.

¹⁶ Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', pp. 275-80.

¹⁷ Ussama Makdisi, 'Reclaiming the Land of the Bible: Missionaries, Secularism, and Evangelical Modernity', *AHR*, 102-3 (1997), pp. 680-713.

themselves probably would have allowed for working amidst the Eastern Churches for some time longer.

CONSTANTINOPLE

The mission among the Armenians of Constantinople started in 1831, when William Goodell, one of the missionaries of Beirut, was transferred to that town. At that time, a strong reform movement within the Armenian community had taken hold of clergy and lay people alike. This explains why the proposals by the American missionaries to establish schools and a printing establishment were warmly welcomed. Under Patriarch Stepan III (1831-9 and 1840-1) the Protestant missionaries in general were allowed to proceed undisturbed. The number of Armenians interested in the American activities steadily grew, and the missionaries looked forward to the day when the Armenian Church would undergo a more thorough reform.¹⁸

However, Patriarch Stepan's successors, Asduadsadur II (1841-4) and especially Matteos (1844-8), began to oppose the mission work. During his 1843-4 trip, Anderson also visited the missionaries in Constantinople. He concluded: 'The reformation among the Armenians is eminently *evangelical*.'¹⁹ Despite this positive judgement, he was not entirely convinced that the formation of a separate church could be avoided: 'these questions in all their relations and bearing appear not to have been fully settled in the minds of the missionaries even up to the time of our arrival among *them*'²⁰ - and neither, apparently, were these questions settled *during* Anderson's visit. Whether indeed the

¹⁸ For a recent evaluation of the influence of ABCFM policy on the mission among the Armenians, see Paul Harris, 'Denominationalism and democracy: ecclesiastical issues underlying Rufus Anderson's Three Self Program' (unpublished paper presented at the North Atlantic Missiology Project Consultation in Madison, Wisconsin, 2-4 November, 1997, *NAMP Position Papers*, 43). For an overview of the start of the mission work, up to the establishment of a separate Protestant Church in Constantinople, see Thomas Otakar Kutvirt, 'The Emergence and Acceptance of Armenia as a Legitimate American Missionary Field', *Armenian Review* 37 (1984), no. 3-147, pp. 7-32 and 'The Development of the Mission to the Armenians at Constantinople through 1846', *Armenian Review*, 37 (1984), 4-148, pp. 31-62. For older overviews of the history of this mission, see Prime, *Forty Years*, and Leon Arpee, *The Armenian Awakening. A History of the Armenian Church, 1820-1860* (Chicago and London, 1909). The chapters in the latter book concerning Armenian Protestantism were later re-published as Leon Arpee, *A Century of Armenian Protestantism, 1846-1946* (New York, 1946).

¹⁹ Anderson, 'Report', p. 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

missionaries in Constantinople, like those in Beirut, began to reckon with the necessity of establishing a separate Protestant Church after Anderson's visit, is a matter of uncertainty, but it seems clear that, contrary to Beirut, where almost no converts were available, in Constantinople a church could have been formed right away. Further study of archival material should reveal whether the missionaries just waited for a better opportunity to do so, or were still reluctant in view of their hopes for a reformation of the Armenian community as a whole.²¹ Whatever might have been the private opinions of the missionaries on the formation of a Protestant Church, a change in policy became apparent only after Patriarch Matteos, who became patriarch in 1844, set himself to bring the evangelically-influenced Armenians - said to number about 8,000! - back into his fold. Although he succeeded in bringing back the majority of them, some refused. Early in 1846, Matteos decided to excommunicate these members.²²

This had severe consequences on the daily lives of the Armenians, since excommunication from the Armenian Church implied exclusion from the Armenian millet as well. Those who were excommunicated lost their legal status in the Ottoman Empire and with this, most ways of earning a living. When this happened to the early converts, the missionaries decided to form a Protestant church, which began with forty members. They then proceeded to help them to obtain official status. They succeeded in this, thanks to the efforts of the English ambassador, Lord Stratford Canning. The latter had some influence at the Sultan's court and had been interested in religious policy matters for some time. In 1846, he succeeded in obtaining official recognition for the Protestants. This was followed in 1850 by recognition of the Protestant millet, and in 1856 by the Hatti Humayun in which freedom of religion was granted to all subjects of the Sultan.²³

What is interesting about the mission among the Armenians is that for quite a long period reform seemed to be a real possibility. This made the missionaries rather careful in their contacts with the

²¹ On this issue, see Kutvirt, 'The Mission to Armenians', p. 58. According to Kutvirt, the missionaries from 1844 onwards began to work towards a separate Protestant Church, even if no concrete steps were taken before 1846. The same is suggested by Arpee, *The Armenian Awakening*, pp. 161-3.

²² Kawerau, *Amerika*, pp. 535-40.

²³ Prime, *Forty Years*, pp. 315-22.

Armenian clergy. Even Anderson, who expressed a clear preference for separate churches, did not force the missionaries into a separatist policy. That reform seemed possible was at least partly due to the fact that at the time of the missionaries' arrival reform was already going on. The Armenians had been searching for ways to modernize and reform their community, for which the American missionaries readily offered their assistance. In hindsight, it seems highly unlikely that such reform would have been possible without schism, but one can hardly blame the missionaries for having hoped to avoid a rupture. It certainly is telling that as soon as the number of 'Evangelicals' began to rise, opposition too began to increase.

URMIA

In 1835, the missionaries Justin Perkins and Asahel Grant, and their wives, Charlotte Bass and Judith S. Campbell, started a mission in Urmia, in northeastern Iran.²⁴ This mission was directed at the 'Nestorians' who lived in this region. The Nestorian Church, or better, the Church of the East, shares the Syriac heritage with the Syrian Orthodox and the Maronites, and therefore often is called 'East-Syrian'. Since the late nineteenth century the designation 'Assyrian' has been generally preferred to 'East-Syrian' or 'Nestorian'. During most of its existence the Church of the East was separated from the Western Church dogmatically and geographically, and after Tamerlane's destructive campaigns of the fourteenth century lived a rather isolated existence in the northeastern parts of the Ottoman and the north-western parts of the Persian empires.

The Assyrians of Persia warmly welcomed the missionaries, and for almost ten years they were able to proceed with their work practically unhindered. The missionaries founded schools for boys and for girls, translated the Bible into the modern vernacular, were invited to preach in Assyrian churches, established a printing press, and distributed religious and educational literature. Assyrian clergy - deacons, priests, and bishops - were employed by the mission and assisted in most of

²⁴ On the history of this mission, see John Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors. A Study of Western Influence on their Relations* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), and H. L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, 1999). On the early period, see in particular Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia among the Nestorian Christians with Notices of the Muhammedans* (Andover, 1843).

the work. However, despite all the sympathy the missionaries experienced from the Assyrians, and despite the good progress of their educational and literary work, they could point to barely two or three persons who in their opinion had become 'truly converted' as a result of their labour.

In 1844, after nearly ten years of undisturbed mission work, this period came to an end. The Patriarch and his family, who represented the religious and political power of the Assyrians, began to oppose the missionaries. In order to prevent repercussions for Assyrians who worked with the mission, the missionaries decided to discontinue most of their activities. The opposition forced them to face a number of issues of mission politics that had not been adequately dealt with before. The opposition of the patriarchal family, which initially was caused by socio-political circumstances, was further fueled by a discussion between the Patriarch and the missionaries concerning financial support for the family and the employment of certain bishops. This matter became rather complicated and caused heated discussion among the missionaries themselves. In the same year, the latter were also accused of proselytism by the Persian government, probably at the instigation of French diplomats who were trying to act for French Roman Catholic missionaries in the same region. The Protestants were able to refute this accusation. They were supported in this by the Assyrians, who confirmed that so far the Protestants had not made one proselyte and had never even tried to make one. The missionaries expressly promised the Persian government that they would not do so in the future either. After about a year, opposition decreased, probably because the patriarchal family did not succeed in gaining enough support among the Assyrians. In 1845, the missionaries resumed most of their activities.

Anderson had not visited Persia in the mid-forties, but he was closely watching the developments in this mission. He was rather worried about the lack of converts and about the employment of Assyrian bishops. The missionaries' policy of *non-proselytism* bothered him most. Contrary to the missionaries' intentions, he explained their behaviour to himself and to the American public as a tactical move due to local circumstances. At that time, it was probably the extensive preaching activities in Assyrian churches that made Anderson give the Urmia missionaries the benefit of the doubt. Anderson always had stressed the importance of 'formal preaching', preferring it to the informal, conversational preaching which most missions in Western

Asia had to confine themselves to. This he might have found sufficient reason to let the missionaries in Urmia continue their policy.²⁵

In 1846, the discussion on mission policy took a decidedly different turn when, for the first time in a Western Asian mission, a fully-fledged revival took place. About fifty Assyrians experienced a classical pietistic conversion. The revival started almost simultaneously among the teenage girls of the 'Female' and the boys of the 'Male' seminaries.²⁶ The students of both these seminaries took the revivalist fervour to their home villages. In the next ten years, bouts of revival occurred from time to time.²⁷ During the fifties, as a result of these revivals a number of local Assyrian churches took on a definitely 'Protestant' character. The liturgical parts of the service were shortened, preaching was given greater attention, new songs were introduced (many of them translated from English) and communion services acquired greater weight. Assyrian priests and deacons began to imitate the missionaries' preaching. Not long after, the mission church which, as in Beirut, served the missionaries and their families, was opened to Assyrians at special occasions. During these special services 'new converts' (although the term 'convert' in Urmia was usually avoided) made their profession of faith and took part in the communion services. Bishops, priests, and deacons of the Church of the East were among the participants.

In the sixties, relationships between the 'Evangelical' and the 'Old Church' party within the Church of the East started to worsen, but it was not until 1871 that the Evangelical Assyrians formally separated themselves from the Church of the East. The missionaries attributed the problems of the sixties mainly to the new patriarch who was consecrated in 1861, but the final separation from the Church of the East might be attributed also to changes among the Protestant

²⁵ On this period, see H. L. Murre-van den Berg, 'Geldelijk of Geestelijk Gewin? Assyrische Bisschoppen op de Loonlijst van een Amerikaanse Zendingspost', *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 77-2 (1997), pp. 241-57, and 'The American Board and the Eastern Churches: the Nestorian Mission (1844-1846)', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 65 (1999), pp. 117-38.

²⁶ The female seminary was headed by the missionary Fidelia Fiske. On her role in the context of the American missionary enterprise of the mid-nineteenth century, see the recent studies of Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA, 1997), and Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (New York and Oxford, 1997).

²⁷ By far the most interesting published source on this period of revival is D. T. Laurie, *Women and her Saviour in Persia* (Boston, 1863). Laurie, a former missionary to Mesopotamia, composed the book in close co-operation with Fidelia Fiske. He included a considerable number of texts written by the early Assyrian converts.

missionaries themselves. In 1869 the 'senior brother', the oldest missionary Justin Perkins, left the field after a stay of almost thirty-five years. He is said always to have opposed a formal separation. When other missionaries took his place, the mission as a whole probably became less scrupulous about the separation from the Church of the East. Another element that should be taken into account was the transfer of the mission to the Presbyterian Board of Missions in 1871. Not only did the Presbyterian Board hold stricter views in this regard, but they also intended to enlarge the scope of the mission to the Moslems of Persia. Converts from this group would inevitably lead to separate Protestant Churches. Lastly, British and Anglican influence on the 'Old Church' Assyrians grew considerably, which in all likelihood further stimulated the formation of a separate Protestant Church.²⁸

Despite these later developments, the history of the Urmia Mission shows that there was a third option open to the missionaries of the American Board: to co-operate with the clergy of an Eastern Church while keeping the potential 'Protestants' within the bounds of an Eastern Church. Although the missionaries and the Evangelical Assyrians did not succeed in maintaining this policy throughout the nineteenth century, they managed to do it for twenty years longer than the other missions in Western Asia. A good relationship with the Assyrian clergy probably was the main factor in this, a relationship which, among other things, was maintained by the amiable character of senior missionary Justin Perkins. Outward circumstances, like the initial prohibition of proselytizing by the Persian government and the rather isolated position of the Assyrians in northwestern Persia, may have further stimulated the Assyrians' openness to the message of the missionaries as well as their willingness to accept diversion within their fold. These circumstances at the same time induced the missionaries to go all the way in working *with* the Church of the East rather than against it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the three missions discussed here, different causes led to the formation of Protestant Churches. To different degrees, the opinions of the missionaries on the Churches of the East, the attitude of the local clergy towards the missionaries, Protestant-Roman Catholic

²⁸ See Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language*, pp. 66-70.

tensions, the policy of the Board in Boston as represented by Rufus Anderson,²⁹ and socio-economic and political circumstances in the countries where mission work was done all played a role. The interplay of these factors determined when and how Protestant Churches came into existence in Western Asia. To describe the emergence of Protestant Churches as due solely to the attitudes of the missionaries towards the Eastern Churches is in my opinion an undue simplification.

The mission in Urmia brings to light another aspect that needs attention. At first, the American Board allowed the missionaries in Persia to continue their 'conservative policy' of co-operation with the Assyrian Church thanks to the fact that the missionaries were allowed to preach in the Assyrian Churches. However, their arguments for this 'conservative' policy were greatly strengthened by the fact that it was in Urmia that for the first time in Western Asia a series of revivals took place which clearly followed the North-American model. If it had not been for these revivals, I doubt whether the Board would have allowed the missionaries in Urmia to proceed much longer with their dissident policy.

These revivals should remind us that among American Evangelicals of the mid-nineteenth century, conversion experience was thought to be the basic experience of a Christian life. Evidence of piety, of true conversion of the heart, of spiritual regeneration, allowed someone to be acknowledged as a true Christian. When such a conversion had taken place, it no longer mattered whether one belonged to a North American or an Eastern Church. In the early years of missionary work in Western Asia, this type of conversion was hardly encountered among the Eastern Christians. This made the missionaries fear that the large majority of these Christians were heading towards eternal damnation. The very moment these Eastern Christians experienced the same type of pietistic conversions as they had experienced themselves, being in one church or another became of secondary importance. This brings us back to Badr's opinion that the mission-

²⁹ In this article, I have not paid attention to what might have been behind Anderson's policy in these matters. Harris, 'Denominationalism and democracy', suggests that Anderson's views were influenced at least by two other factors: internal American discussions on ecclesiology ('denominationalism'), and financial worries. These financial worries became all the more pressing when no 'tangible results' (compare also Arpee, *The Armenian Awakening*, pp. 162-3) could be reported, making fundraising increasingly difficult.

aries' ranking of soteriology above ecclesiology, that is, their valuing 'conversion of the heart' above all 'outward forms', is fundamental for understanding their mission work among the Eastern Christians.³⁰ This ranking might not explain why Anderson insisted so much on the formation of separate Protestant churches in Beirut and Constantinople, but it certainly does explain the long years in which the missionaries in Urmia were allowed to continue their work within the Church of the East. As long as the Evangelical Assyrians were accepted by the majority of the Assyrian clergy and the missionaries could work alongside bishops and priests to make their influence felt in the community as a whole rather than in a separatist group, there was no theological need for a separate Protestant Church. Anderson might have wanted it otherwise, considering his emphasis on local Protestant congregations, but the missionaries in Urmia effectively defended their position with the help of this Evangelical paradigm of the fundamental importance of the conversion experience.

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³⁰ Badr, 'Mission to "Nominal Christians"', pp. 308-12.