A New Crusade or an Old One?

Heather J. Sharkey
University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers

Part of the African History Commons, History of Christianity Commons, History of Religion Commons, Islamic Studies Commons, Islamic World and Near East History Commons, Missions and World Christianity Commons, Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons, Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons, and the Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/34
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.
A New Crusade or an Old One?

Abstract
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.

Disciplines
African History | History of Christianity | History of Religion | Islamic Studies | Islamic World and Near East History | Missions and World Christianity | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Near Eastern Languages and Societies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/34
A New Crusade or an Old One?

HEATHER J. SHARKLEY

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. 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’. A year later, a British missionary in Algeria 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’.

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.

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.

American minister of the Dutch Reformed Church who established missions in Iraq and Bahrain, organized international missionary conferences, and edited the journal The Moslem World, and published several books including, for example, a study of the Islamic apocalyptic principle which deterred easy conversion to Christianity. Zwemer conscientiously 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.

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 supplement 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 with increasing frequency, but also increasing pressure from Muslim nationalists who demanded rights of access for Muslim children to mission schools with increasing frequency, but also...
as Egypt’s American University in Cairo (founded by Charles R. Watson, a second-generation Presbyterian missionary and author of a work enti
titled Egypt and the Christian Crusade) responded to nationalist pressures by
downplaying or eliminating their evangelical connections while highlighting their
general goal of community service. These trends ac
celerated 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 be
tore and exposed missionary institutions to the possibility of nationaliz
ation.

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 western
ized, globalized world. At the same time they have asserted the need to continue historical connections between a triad of tabshir, isti’amar, and istisraq—that is, Christian evangelism (often also rendered as tan
sir, Christianization), Western imperialism (in its political, economic, and cultural dimensions), and Orientalist scholarship on Islam and Muslims. A general assumption in many of these works is that Chris
rians and Muslims remain locked as rivals and will always remain in a kind of
civilizational clash, thereby showing that the views of Samuel Huntingto
son and his supporters find a reciprocal Islamic expression.

While some Arabic writers have already 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 Is
lamic mission (dhul’wa) to counteract Christian evangelism, that is, by re
versing the ‘context’ 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.

Concerned with the gravity of the Christian threat, one Gulf Arab writer has called for more isolationist measures and policies. He pre
scribes the following measures: Arab elites (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 dis
ourage 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.

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 Ara
bic works discuss him as if he were still alive and present him as the ar
chetypal modern crusader, forging imperialism, Orientalism, and evan
gelism into a pernicious anti-Islamic alliance. Strikingly, Zwemer re
tains the admiration of some Christian evangelical groups today who
reckon with this missionary history while seeking to consign crusades to the past.

The recent crusading rhetoric emanating from the United States, be
fore 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 devel
op a ‘crusader artillery system’ and President George W. Bush’s post-11
September invocation (later retracted) of a ‘crusade’ against Muslim ter
rorists and their sponsors. Consider, too, debates about the political Jesus occurring in the American press. Rejecting narrowly paciftic inter
pretations of his career (with implications for the Iraq conflict), one con
servative 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.’ One thing is certain: among both Muslim and Christian audiences, the frequent use of militant Christian interpreters in the current political milieu—for example, among some American evangelicals who have been exhorting their followers to di
rect ‘prayer missiles’ and ‘cruse and scud prayers’ to defeat the Iraqis in war—can only worsen perceptions of global, religious-based conflict.

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

Notes

1. See, for example, Muhammad al-Bahi, al-Fikr al-islami al-hadith wa sultanuhu bi istiman al-gharbi, 8–ed. (Cairo, 1975) and Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Jalaynd, al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabshir (Cairo, 1999).
2. W. A. Rice, Crusades of the Twentieth Century, or the Christian Missionary and the Muslim: An Introduction to Work among Muhammadans (London, 1910); p. xlv.
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.
9. See, for example, Ibrahim Khalil Ahmad, al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabshir wa-sultanuhu bi imbibilayni al-‘alamiyya (Cairo, 1973), Muhammad al-Dahan, Quwa al-shar al-muhtalafat al-isti’amar wa-mawqafuhu min al-islam wa-l-muslimin (Mansura, 1986).