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A New Crusade or an Old One?

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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
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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’.2

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 apostasy principle which deterred easy conversion to Christianity. 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.

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 Kamel 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 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 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-
fore and exposed missionary institutions to the possibility of national-
ization.

**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 close and
continuing historical connections between a triad of *tabsir, isti’amar*, and
*ištīraq* – that is, Christian evangelism (often also rendered as *tanzsir*, Christianization), Western imperialism (in its political, economic,
and cultural dimensions), and Orientalist scholarship on Islam and
Muslims.2 A general assumption in many of these works is that Chris-
tians and Muslims remain locked as rivals and antagonists in a kind of
civilizational clash, thereby showing that the views of Samuel Hunting-
don and his supporters find a reciprocal Islamic expression.13

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 Is-
lamic mission (dīwān) 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 socialising 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.14

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 élites (who often value English-
language education for their children) must stop patronizing Christian
schools and should avoid socialising 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-
courage 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 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.15 Strikingly, Zwemer re-
tains 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 audaces, a couple of his books re-
main 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.17

**Consign crusades to the past**

In these Arabic works that discuss Christian evangelism, Muslim writ-
ers 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 de-
moralize Muslims and thereby to facilitate their subjugation.

The recent crusading rhetoric emanating from the United States, be-
f ore 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.16 Consider, too, debates about the political
Jesus occurring in the American goss, Rejecting narrowly pacific 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’.17 One thing is certain: among both
Muslim and Christian audiences, the frequent use of militant Christian
critiques in the current political milieu – for example, among some
American evangelicals who have been exhorting their followers to di-
rect ‘prayer missiles’ and ‘cruise and scud prayers’ to defeat the Iraqis in
war – can only worsen perceptions of global, religious-based conflict.18

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

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1. See, for example, Muhammad al-Bahi, *al-Filak wa-l-islami al-hadith wa silatuha bi islami’al-gharbi, 8–ed. (Cairo, 1975) and Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Julaynd, *al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabsir* (Cairo, 1999).
4. Worried that this project would stoke Muslim opposition to their fledging 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.
8. See, for example, Ibrahim Khalil Ahmad, *al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tabsir wa silatuha bi’imbiraniyya li’al’amiyya* (Cairo, 1980), and Muhammad al-Dahan, *Quwa al-shar al-mutahala al-isti’amar wa-mawqufuha min al-islam wa-l-muslimin* (Mansura, 1986).
10. See, for example, Hasen Makki, *Abul-Tabarq al masih f til’asima’al-qawmiyya* (Omdurman, 1990).
13. http://answering-
15. His name is misrendered in this text as ‘Zoimer’ – clearly a sign that it was translated from an Arabic source.
16. See, for example, Ahmad Sal al-Din al-
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.

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**Notes**

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