A New Crusade or an Old One?

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://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. https://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/34
For more information, please contact repository@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: https://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/34
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.
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)2 responded to nationalist pressures by
downplaying or eliminating their evangelistic 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 tabshir, isti’mar, and
isti’draq – 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.3 A general assumption in many of these works is that Chris-
tian and Muslim societies remain locked as rivals and antagonists in a kind
of civilizational clash, thereby showing that the views of Samuel Hunting-
ton and his supporters find a reciprocal Islamicentric expression.4,5

While some Arabic writers have merely diagnosed the evangelical
treat or discussed its historical workings, others have offered advice
on how to respond in its wake. Thinking globally, some have urged Is-
lamic mission (ۧلاو) to counteract Christian evangelism, that is, by
reversing 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.6

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 socializing with non-Muslims in general, and
Arab governments should shut down churches that serve expatriates,
instigate 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.1,2

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
archetypal modern crusader, forking imperialism, Orientalism, and evan-
gelism into a pernicious anti-Islamic alliance.3 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.7

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-
oup a ‘crusader artillery system’ and President George W. Bush’s post-11
September invocation (later retracted) of a ‘crusade’ against Muslim ter-
orists and their sponsors.8,9 Consider, too, debates about the political
Jesus occurring in the American press. Rejecting narrowly pacifist inter-
pretations of his career (with implications for the Iraq conflict), one con-
servative think-tank analyst affirmed in a recent New York Times editori-
al that Jesus was also, as the Bible declares, ‘the Lion of the Tribe of
Judah…who judges and wages war’.10 One thing is certain: among both
Muslim and Christian audiences, the frequent use of militant Christian
figures 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, religiously-based conflict.11

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
reconcil with this missionary history while seeking to consign crusades
to the past.

Notes

1. See, for example, Muhammad al-Bahi, al-Fikr al-islami al-hadith wa-salatuha bi’ist-manal-ghurbi, 8–ed. (Cairo, 1975) and Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Julaynd, al-Ishtiraq wa-la-tabsir (Cairo, 1999).
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-Istiraq wa-l-tabsir wa-salatuha bi’il-bimilhaliyya al-‘alamiyyya (Cairo, 1973); Muhammad al-Dahan, Quwa al-shar al-mutahalifa al-isti’draq, al-tabshir, al-isti’mar wa-mawqafuhu min al-islam wa-l-muslimin (Mansura, 1986).
11. See, for example, Hasan Makki, Ab’ul-dallab al-mashi fi al-‘asimal-qawmiyya (Omdurman, 1990).

Translations

‘Mutual Hostility: The Islamic Century’ is an excerpt from Egyptian historian Mansura al-Ishtiraq wa-l-tasbih wa-silatuhamu bil-isti’iraq al-‘alamiyyya (Cairo, 1989), p. 3.

‘Zoimer’ clearly a sign that it was transliterated from an Arabic source.

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.


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 (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003). Her current research examines the history of Christian evangelism among Egyptian Muslims during the heyday of British imperialism.