

American Christians and Islam: evangelical culture and Muslims from the colonial period to the age of terrorism.

Thomas S. Kidd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xx, 201 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-13349-2

Americans across the generations have 'conversed about Islam regularly' even if they have rarely been 'conversant with Islam' (p. 1). So Thomas S. Kidd demonstrates in *American Christians and Islam*, a clearly written and cogently argued work of intellectual history that considers American Christian writings about Islam and Muslims from the late seventeenth century to the years following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The thinkers he features range from Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards to Billy Graham and Pat Robertson, as well as a host of others in between. Kidd shows how American Christians have repeatedly used Islam and Muslims as a foil for the construction of their own faith and identities, for the discrediting of opponents, or for the construction of 'end time' scenarios, by making Muslims into 'players in eschatological speculation' (p. 17).

Chapters 1 and 2 examine American Christian thinking about Islam from the late seventeenth-century colonial era to the foundation of the U.S. republic. In this period, American Christian readers were fascinated and repulsed by the so-called 'Barbary Pirates', that is, North African privateers from cities like Algiers and Tripoli, who seized Christian sailors in the Mediterranean and enslaved them. Stories about these pirates began to circulate in the American colonies after 1671, when Captain William Foster of Roxbury, Massachusetts, was captured and enslaved

with his son. American Christian writers in this period looked to the Barbary Pirates to emphasize a picture of Muslim tyranny, which they contrasted with American civic and moral integrity. In this period, too, American Christian writers frequently equated Muslims with the Antichrist and with Roman Catholicism.

Chapter 3 discusses early nineteenth-century American missions to the Ottoman Empire. In Asia Minor, the Levant, and later Iran, missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) theoretically launched missions to Muslims. In practice, however, they focused on converting Orthodox Christians, not Muslims, to evangelical Protestantism. Kidd writes that only a few hundred eastern Christians became Protestant in the nineteenth century (p. 46). Strictly speaking, the numbers, though modest, were somewhat greater. In Egypt alone, the Evangelical (Presbyterian) church, counted approximately 7,000 baptized members by 1900, the vast majority of them having come from Coptic Orthodox backgrounds. The growth of Protestantism among Armenians in Asia Minor was comparable.

Chapter 4 studies Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), a missionary of the (Dutch) Reformed Church in America and founder of the journal *The Muslim World* who extolled the idea of rapid, worldwide evangelization and who styled himself as a missionary to Muslims. Kidd portrays Zwemer as a man who recognized Islam's strengths even while believing in Christian truth and superiority. Influential in his own lifetime, Kidd notes, Zwemer has continued to inspire American evangelical missions to the Muslim world (as subsequent chapters show). Kidd's reading of

Zwemer is very sympathetic – arguably too sympathetic. Certainly few secular academics – and few Muslims – are likely to share such positive feelings about a man who spent his career hammering in books and articles on what he regarded as Islam’s backwardness and stagnation.

Chapter 5 looks at the post-World War II period and charts the rise of more conservative evangelical missions that have pursued work among Muslims abroad, such as the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in sub-Saharan Africa and the Southern Baptist Convention, which has worked in places like Lebanon. This chapter examines the development of Christian Zionism following the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948, and shows how millenarian beliefs galvanized some American Christians who saw Israel’s establishment as a prerequisite for, or proof of, Christ’s imminent second coming. This chapter briefly considers how American Christian Zionism strained American-Arab and by extension Christian-Muslim relations.

Chapter 6 turns back to the United States to consider the growth of Muslim populations in America. Kidd focuses primarily on the Nation of Islam, and on the spread of Islam, more generally, among African-Americans who were responding to the history of white supremacy, slavery, and its aftermath. Kidd considers the fears and reactions that the Nation of Islam elicited among American evangelicals and connects this to the rise of evangelical missions to Muslims within the United States.

Chapter 7 examines what Kidd calls ‘maturing evangelical missions’ to the Middle East. The chapter considers new efforts among American evangelicals to

revive the ideals of Samuel Zwemer by reaching out to Muslims. This idea gained momentum in 1974 when Billy Graham organized a conference in Lausanne, Switzerland that drew together a worldwide cadre of evangelicals. In the post-1974 period, some American evangelicals, recognizing the failures of past missions to Muslims, discussed ways of making Christianity more palatable or more culturally adapted to Muslims.

Chapter 8 studies the writings of Christian conservatives in aftermath of Sept 11<sup>th</sup>. Kidd argues that George W. Bush offended many American Christian conservatives and demonstrated his own moderate or 'conciliatory' evangelical Christian views by speaking publicly, for example, about the common God of Christians, Muslims, and Jews (pp. 145-46). Yet while some Christian thinkers emphasized core values that the three 'Abrahamic' faiths have shared, others in the post-9/11 milieu embraced the idea of the clash of civilizations while articulating apocalyptic visions associated with Muslim terrorism. Meanwhile, a small group of conservative evangelicals began to distance themselves from Christian Zionism and from support for Israel as way of wooing Arabs and Muslims.

*American Christians and Islam* does not aim to provide a history of the Middle East or of Islam – it is instead a history of American, and more explicitly, of American Christian, perceptions. Readers need to look elsewhere if they wish to understand, for example, how Muslim activists have regarded Samuel Zwemer. (Zwemer today is as reviled among Arab Muslim conservatives as he appears to be admired among American evangelical conservatives.) Likewise, readers will need to

look elsewhere to understand how Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere have regarded Christian evangelism, and why American missions to Muslims elicited so few conversions – even if, as Kidd notes, the rare examples of Muslim converts to Christianity have remained such a source of fascination for American Christians.

Scholars may compare this book to some other recent works that have explored the evolution of American relations with the Arab-Islamic world, or the place of Muslims in America. Key among these works are Robert J. Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (1995), Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (2001); Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (2006); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (2008); and aiming for a more popular audience, Michael B. Oren, *Faith, Power, and Fantasy: America and the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (2007). My own book, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in the Age of Empire* (2008), may belong in this list as well. Relative to the works of these other scholars, Kidd (who is an expert on the history of American evangelicalism) places a greater emphasis on the history of American evangelical imaginings of Muslims. Kidd himself expresses some sympathy for American evangelical approaches to Muslims. He does so in the epilogue by voicing the ‘hope that conservative Protestants can maintain a peaceable but faithful witness to Muslims’ (p. 168). Statements like this last one show that *American Christians and Islam* is not a product of the secular Middle East and Islamic studies establishment.

It is a Christian-centered account, with the later chapters focusing on conservative evangelicals especially.

A key strength of *American Christians and Islam* is that it surveys a spectrum of American Christian and evangelical thought vis-à-vis Muslims across three centuries, and does so in a manner that is very clear, so that even a reader new to the subject could appreciate it. Assigned in a class on Middle Eastern or Islamic studies, this book would be guaranteed to stimulate lively debate.

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