In the late twentieth century, many Muslim thinkers reflected on the Christi-
An evangelical enterprise and identi-
ied it as part of a modern crusade
against Islam. Before the First World
War, many Christian missionaries them-
selves would have agreed with this as-
cessment. In 1910, for example, a British
missionary in Iran embraced the crus-
sading ideal in an evangelical manual
entitled *Crusaders of the Twentieth Cen-
tury, 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 Al-
giers 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, practition-
ers of local religions, and even ‘Oriental’ Christians (meaning Copts, Ar-
menians, and other adherents of Eastern churches whom Western mis-
sionaries 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.

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-educat-
ed Egyptian who in the 1930s became a Christian evangelist and preach-
er 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 Evan-
gelical Church under the aegis of the American Presbyterians.

The social impact of missionaries on Muslim communities was never-
theless much greater than conversion rates suggest, for two reasons.

First, missionaries founded schools and clinics that contributed to the de-
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, mission-
ary 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 sup-
plant 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 mo-
bilizing 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 stringen-
cies, 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-
out obligatory Christian study. During the interwar era, institutions such

**A New Crusade or an Old One?**

**HEATHER J. SHARKEY**
as Egypt’s American University in Cairo (founded by Charles R. Watson, a second-generation Presbyterian missionary and author of a work entitled 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 accelerated 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 before and exposed missionary institutions to the possibility of nationalization.

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 westernized, globalized world. At the same time they have asserted close and continuing historical connections between a triad of tabshir, isti’amar, and istithraq—that is, Christian evangelism (often also rendered as tanbir, 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 Christians and Muslims remain locked as rivals and antagonists in a kind of civilizational clash, thereby suggesting that the views of Samuel Huntington and his supporters find a reciprocal islamocentric expression.18 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 Islamic missions (al-tawfiq) to counteract Christian evangelism, that is, by reversing the ‘context’ for souls. Thinking locally, others have urged Arab national governments to police 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.20

Concerned with the gravity of the Christian threat, one Gulf Arab writer has called for more isolationist measures and policies. He provoked the following measures: Arab élites (who often value English-language education for their children) must stop patronizing Christian missions, thus construed, was a form of cultural works discuss him as if he were still alive and present him as the archetypal modern crusader, forging imperialism, Orientalism, and evangelism into a pernicious anti-Islamic alliance.19 Strikingly, Zwemer retains the admiration of some Christian evangelical groups today who reckon with this imperialist history while seeking to consign crusades to the past.

The recent crusading rhetoric emanating from the United States, before and during the Anglo-American invasion, may seem to lend credence to claims about a persistent Western crusader-imperialist mentality. Consider, for example, the US military programme to develop a ‘crusader artillery system’ and President George W. Bush’s post-11 September invocation (later retracted) of a ‘crusade’ against Muslim terrorists and their sponsors.22 Consider, too, debates about the political Jesus occupying in the American gossp. Rejecting narrowly pacific interpretrations of his career (with implications for the Iraq conflict), one conservative 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.’23 One thing is certain: among both Muslim and Christian audiences, the frequent use of militant Christian characteristics in the current political milieu—for example, among some American evangelicals who have been exhorting their followers to direct ‘prayer missiles’ and ‘cruse and scud prayers’ to defeat the Iraqis in war—can only worsen perceptions of global, religiously-based conflict.24 There are at least two lessons to be learned from the history of modern Christian missions to Muslims. The first is that one cannot understand political Islam without recognizing its tension-fraught relationship to political Christianity and to the legacies of Western imperialism. The second is that practical attempts to promote communal coexistence 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-silatuhu bi-listi’mar al-qurba (Cairo, 1975) and Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Jalil, al-tasrif wa-l-tasbih (Cairo, 1939).
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-tasrif wa-l-tasbih wa-silatuhum bee l-bimanti’iya al-‘ali’miya (Cairo, 1973); Muhammad al-Dahan, Qawa al-ṣaḥr al-μu-atulmuḥafa al-istithraq, al-tasbir, al-isti’mar wa-mawqifuna min al-islam wa-l-muslimin (Mansura, 1986).
11. See, for example, Hasan Makki, Ab’ul-dalalat al-mashi fi al-‘a’smilaq-aqwaqmiya (Omdurman, 1990).
15. Because of their implications for Coptic-Muslim tensions in contemporary Egypt, the controversial tactics of Zwemer even earn a reference in Saad Eddin Ibrahim et al., The Copts of Egypt, Minority Rights Group International (London, 1996), p. 13. His name is misspelled in this text as ‘Zoimer’—clearly a sign that it was translated from an Arabic source.
16. See, for example, Ahmad Sa’d al-Din al-Basati, al-Tasrif wa-athruhu fi al-bilad al-‘arabiyya al-īslamiyya (Cairo, 1989), p. 3.
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 ‘Cruisers Belong to the Past’, The Economist, 18 May 2002, pp. 30–1.

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