

Western Christian missionaries in Lebanon and the Middle East have long been the subject of either valorization or vituperation, and in the bulk of missionary literature, it is undoubtedly true that valorization has been predominant. The missionaries, as anyone who has ever ventured into their archives will readily attest, were prolific writers. They kept detailed records and evoked worlds, both those that they left behind in Europe or America and those they encountered and sought to change in Lebanon and the wider region. They compiled, described, and recorded incessantly. Not surprisingly, they were also the authors of countless histories and hagiographies, the sum total of which can be described very simply as paeans to the visions and virtues of those men and women who ventured East putatively to rescue it from its oriental stagnation. The historiographical landscape produced by these pro-mission authors is dominated by larger than life individuals: Eli Smith, Daniel Bliss, Henri Lammens, or Louis Cheiko. So they recorded and so many still believe the missionaries to be heroes, and their work, heroic, especially in light of the terrible revolutions, the coups, and the wars that ravaged the twentieth-century Middle East, and that still weigh so heavily and obviously on the region today.

But nostalgia is not history. The last major work on American missionaries to Syria and Lebanon was written by A.L. Tibawi in 1966¹, a clear indication that among English language professional historians, at least, missionaries as a subject have long since fallen out of favor. While any discussion of Latin missions and missionaries to the Levant has to acknowledge the brilliant work of Bernard Heyberger², there is no question that decolonization and nationalism have diminished the scholarship on missions and missionaries. There is also no question that missionaries have routinely been described in Ottoman and Arab nationalist historiography as mere agents of empire, and their mission work condemned as the moral equivalent of imperialism. There is, undoubtedly, in retrospect much that can be criticized in the work of the missionaries, and the essays in this issue explore some of the arrogance and racialism inherent in their work.

By definition, missions carry something they consider to be of value - rationalism, modernity, science, medicine, and most obviously religion - from one place - their own - to another - some one else's. To some other place. By definition, as far as those who embark on missions are concerned, the inhabitants of those other places - Beirut, Aleppo, Mount Lebanon, India, Africa, Latin America, or even the slums of London - clearly lack that which the missionaries provide, and are unable, on their own,

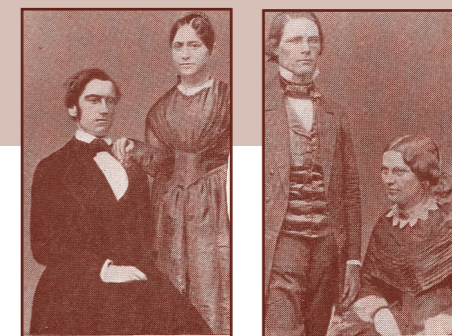


Mrs Isaac Bird, H. H. Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburg, 1910.

to ever become truly Christian, truly rational, or truly scientific. Because of this general ethos, and despite the Christian humility enjoined by many a biblical passage, missionaries routinely exhibited and betrayed a sense of superiority over supposedly ignorant and indolent "natives." This stereotype of the missionary as the camp follower of imperialism is perhaps most famously captured in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which details the travails of an African society torn asunder by unscrupulous missionaries, but it is also present in Amin Maalouf's *Rock of Tanios* which presents a caricature of American missionaries working in Mount Lebanon. No matter how exaggerated, both portrayals do capture something that linked all Western missionaries, whether Protestant or Catholic, whether Anglican or American, Jesuit or Franciscan. They all defined themselves religiously, politically, scientifically, and culturally against the very people they allegedly wanted to save or to reform. Islam was certainly represented as a fundamental enemy of missionaries, but so too, and here the essays in this volume shed such critical light, was Christianity at least as it had survived and been elaborated in its ancient homeland.

But surely now the critical pendulum has swung too far toward a myopic nationalism. The conviction by nationalists that missionaries were mere ciphers of empire has for the most part confused historical confluence with premeditated intent. Missionaries were not simply and never always imperialistic even if their most noted achievements were recorded in an age of Western Empire. Their relationship to their home governments was not always easy. More to the point, the long missionary encounter between Orient and Occident has produced entire communities who are as authentically indigenous as any other - be they Armenian Catholics or Protestants, Greek Catholics, or Arab Protestants. To simply exchange a missionary classification that privileged the European or the American over the "native," for one that privileged the nation, community, or sect over the perfidious foreign "missionary" is, in effect, to replace one ahistorical representation for another. It is to simply switch perspectives within the same stereotypical set-piece drama. It is to proffer the same tired heroic narrative with even less evidence than that originally produced by the missionaries. It is to reify rather than historicize. And it is bound to miss, just as the missionaries themselves so often did in their own writings, what was most fascinating and alluring about the enduring missionary presence in the Middle East. Encounters rarely, if ever, unfold in a simple teleological manner. More often than not, they produce so much that is new and contradictory, so much that is difficult, but also dynamic. They create new worlds rather than simply recreate old ones.

The six essays assembled here point precisely to this dynamic in missionary encounters. As a whole, they work to demythologize the missionaries and their institutions but not in the crude manner of the recent nationalist historiography that reduces all missionary activity to “cultural imperialism.” As the essays demonstrate, there is still much we do not know. There is an entire history, for example, of Maronite or Syrian Orthodox missionaries about which we are largely ignorant. There is also an entire history of indigenous intermediaries so-called native helpers, catechizers, and pastors—about whom we are also ignorant. But we do know, and the essays in this issue amply bear this point out, that the missionaries never operated alone or uncontested. Far from being, as so many like to imagine, a Muslim-Christian problem, the missionaries, be they Protestant or Catholic, operated quite freely in an Ottoman context, and their primary opponents, as well as their adherents, were drawn from the ranks of the empire's Christian subjects. Akram Khater's essay delves into the history of the Maronite mystic Hindiyya, her vision and her suppression, to point to just such a case, and it underscores the profoundly important gendered dimension of almost all missionary activity. Bruce Masters' essay, in turn, sets the stage for nineteenth-century missionary history by comparing the different strategies employed, and different results produced, by Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the region of Aleppo in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in relation to the desires and decisions of the local Christian population. The Ottoman context of missionary labor, which Bruce Masters has done so much to revive in his recent work, is given particular attention by Malek Sharif in his essay on the genealogy and politics of smallpox inoculation in nineteenth-century Beirut. His essay challenges the missionary historiography in which the missionaries have often represented themselves as being not only the primary but the unique contributors to scientific modernity in the Middle East and elsewhere in the non-European world. This theme is elaborated by Jens Hanssen in his deconstruction of “bio-politics” in the late empire through a criticism of Benoît Boyer's *Les Conditions Hygiéniques*. Hanssen, in fact, points to a colonial anxiety that emerged with the modernization of the Middle East, and the rise of an articulate and confident middle class in the Ottoman empire that competed with, and not simply emulated, Western missionaries and educators. The final two essays in the issue, by Youssef Mouawad and Jean Said Makdisi, examine the ideological underpinnings of a Jesuit and a Protestant educational institution respectively. By examining the relationship between metropolitan France and Victorian England on the one hand and Ottoman Lebanon, on the other, these authors offer a far richer history than has been traditionally been told of the Collège Secondaire de l'Université Saint-Joseph and the British Syrian Training



Rev. and Mrs. J. Edwards Ford; Rev. and Mrs. William Bird; H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

College respectively.

In their reevaluation of the significance of various facets of Western missions, these essays are simply the beginning of a long overdue reexamination of the complexity of missionary history in the Middle East. The variety of the subjects covered in these six essays exemplify the daunting scale of such an undertaking. They are by no means the last word, but they do set us down a road that we should have travelled long ago.



Mr Oliver and his dog visiting Ras el Metns' school, Quaker Missionary 1903-5; private collection Nadim Shehadi.

NOTES

1 A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

2 Bernard Heyberger, *Les Chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme Catholique* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994) and *Hindiyya: Mystique et criminelle 1720-1798* (Paris: Aubier, 2001).

3 Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).