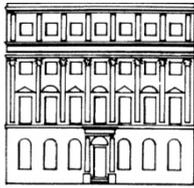


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Heather J. Sharkey:

*Middle East Missions: Nationalism, Religious Liberty, and
Cultural Encounter*

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Middle East Missions: Nationalism, Religious Liberty, and Cultural Encounter, symposium co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute London and the Christian Missions in Global History Seminar, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and held at the GHIL on 26 May 2011.

Scholarly interest in the history of global Christian missions has burgeoned in the past twenty years, producing rich opportunities for transnational, interdisciplinary research. At the same time, in Middle Eastern studies, historians have begun to pay new attention to Christians living in Islamic societies. The workshop on Middle East Missions occurred at the intersection of these two fields of inquiry. Organized by Deborah Gaitskell (School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, University of London), Silke Strickrodt (GHIL), and Rosemary Seton (SOAS), the workshop focused on case studies involving Egypt and Britain during the early to mid twentieth century, and drew an international audience of participants. Together, the presenters argued that the history of British missions—and missionaries—vis-à-vis modern Egypt has been inextricably connected to broader issues in intellectual and diplomatic history; to the history of churches and missions as social and political institutions; and to the study of Egyptian nationalism and British imperialism.

Heather J. Sharkey (University of Pennsylvania) served as the discussant for this workshop and also surveyed the state of the field. She attributed the growing interest in this subject to various factors. First, she noted, there has been both a rethinking of Muslim-Christian relations in the post-9/11 milieu and a rejection among academics of the Samuel Huntington-inspired discourse of the 'clash of civilizations'. Second, many young scholars of Middle Eastern heritage (and especially those who come from Egyptian and Lebanese Christian diasporic communities) have been setting new research agendas in European and North American universities. Third, scholars have begun to find rich materials in the archives of Christian mission and church-associated organizations, many of which have generous access policies that facilitate research. Fourth, historians have drawn inspiration from recent works in British imperial and postcolonial history, which have recognized religion as an important (if complicated) factor in popular and political culture, in both Britain and its former empire. Four papers followed these introductory remarks.

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First came the paper of Vivian Ibrahim (SOAS), entitled 'The Coptic Question: Religion and Nationalism in Colonial Egypt'. She focused on the Copts, the indigenous Christians of Egypt, who accounted for perhaps 10 per cent of the Egyptian population in 1900. Drawing on British government archives, Egyptian Arabic newspapers, and a range of published works, Ibrahim told a complex story about modern Coptic activism and British-Coptic relations in the early twentieth century. She showed how British Anglicans expressed solidarity with the Coptic Orthodox Church and with Coptic Egyptians. Missionaries in particular lent credence to the story of Kyriakos Mikhail, a Coptic journalist based in London, who in 1911 published a series of articles that emphasized Muslim injustice towards the Christian minority of Egypt. These articles inspired a media flurry in Britain over 'The Coptic Question' and reverberated into Egypt by prompting Muslim and Christian Egyptians to debate the meaning of Egyptian nationalism and the role that Copts should (or could) play therein. In the end, debates over the 'Coptic Question' within Egypt inspired a more assertive brand of Coptic activism.

Above all, Vivian Ibrahim's paper demonstrated the importance of the expatriate, diasporic Coptic community, and of its transnational connections, in shaping Coptic society in Egypt. It is significant that Kiriakos Mikhail wrote in London, not Cairo: the location and the distance arguably made it possible for him to advance claims that would have been too strident to air in Egypt. The London venue also enabled him to find an influential and sympathetic British audience. Recent scholarship on the Coptic diaspora—particularly in the United States, where there has been a powerful Coptic lobby working in Washington, DC—has recognized the significance of expatriate politics for Coptic Orthodoxy today. Ibrahim's study of 'The Coptic Question' in early twentieth-century Britain may illustrate the beginning of this trend.

In a paper entitled 'British Missionaries and Religious Liberty in Egypt, 1919–48', John Stuart (Kingston University) spoke about the fascinating career of one missionary. This was Stanley Andrew Morrison, who worked in Egypt for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1920 to 1951. John Stuart called Morrison 'an inveterate and assiduous lobbyist' who devoted an 'equal commitment to serving the mission and to furthering the cause of religious liberty'. Morrison became a leading figure in the Egypt Inter-Mission Council

(a body of American, British, and other Protestant missions founded in Cairo in 1922), and both contributed to and benefited from the International Missionary Council, which was founded in New York in 1921. Through these avenues he helped to shape the human rights discourses that were expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and gained ecumenical support from the World Council of Churches (which was founded in Geneva in the same year).

Stuart's ultimate achievement in the paper was to confirm, through his study of Morrison, the centrality of missionaries to the formation of international human rights discourses. At the same time, his paper integrated missionaries into a broader field of intellectual and diplomatic history while paying close attention to British and British imperial history.

Samir Boulos (University of Zurich) presented a paper entitled 'British Missionary Schools in Egypt: Spaces of Cultural Entanglements, 1900-56', which relied substantially on oral sources. He applied Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the formation of *habitus*, that is, systematic manners of 'being, seeing, acting and thinking', to the study of mission schools and their graduates, and concentrated on two schools that flourished in the half century before the Suez Crisis. These were the English Mission College, founded in Cairo 1922 as an outgrowth of the Church Mission to the Jews, and Bethel Girls School, founded in Suez in 1906 as a primary school of the interdenominational Egypt General Mission.

A few of the people whom Boulos interviewed were Muslims who attended one of these Christian schools. Their positive comments about their classroom experiences challenge the claims about Christian missionary coercion and duplicity that Egyptian Muslim nationalists, beginning in the 1930s, invoked to justify restrictions on missionary activities. These Muslim graduates emphasized the ethical and moral, rather than explicitly Christian, dimensions of their mission-school educations, and thereby, Boulos argued, negotiated their way out of possible identity crises. Further research may help to elucidate whether the Muslim graduates' emphasis on universal ethics in the classroom indicated an openness to inter-communal symbiosis. Boulos also touched on the possible consequences of social class as mediated through schools. He noted that the English Mission College, whose students came from the petite bourgeoisie, tried to

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instil the value of individualism more than the Bethel Girls School, which catered to poor students. His paper represents a case study of the social and ideological differences that distinguished Christian missions from each other.

In a paper entitled 'Christian Mission Provoked by Islamic Piety', Catriona Laing (Cambridge University), examined the career of Constance Padwick (1886–1968), another dynamic CMS missionary to Egypt. Padwick worked during the inter-war and immediate post-war period, so that her career overlapped almost completely with that of Stanley Morrison (whom John Stuart discussed in his paper). Among female missionaries to the Middle East, Padwick stood out as an exceptional scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies.

Laing focused in her paper on Padwick's most substantial publication, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use* (1961). Throughout her career in the Middle East, Padwick had collected some 150 prayer manuals that Muslims used for devotion. Many of these, which reflected Sufi tendencies, suggested to Padwick 'a warmer . . . Qur'an', or what we could arguably call (adapting the evangelical Christian expression) an Islam of the heart. To Padwick, the manuals suggested points of Islamic and Christian convergence. Many of them evinced an intense devotion towards and adoration of Muhammad, elevating him to the status 'of something more than mere man' in a way that may have implied 'a desire for a Christ-like form of mediation'. Padwick appears to have seen in these manuals a bridge for Muslims approaching Christianity, leading Laing to argue that 'Padwick's engagement with Islamic piety and her interest in living religion was fuelled by a desire to witness to Christ', and that her book confirmed her legacy as a 'mission strategist'.

The discussion following the paper revealed an interesting twist in this story. In response to a question about why a British publisher re-issued *Muslim Devotions* in 1996, Laing remarked that Padwick's book appears to have gained respect today among British Muslim missionaries, who welcome it—precisely because of its presentation of a Christ-like Muhammad—as a bridge for Christians approaching Islam.

The papers presented at this workshop generated lively, fruitful discussion, and illuminated two kinds of linked histories. The first kind was Muslim-Christian inter-communal history in Egypt and on the world stage. The second kind was British-Egyptian transnation-

al history. The latter, transnational dimension calls to mind what the historian Daniel T. Rodgers observed in his book *Atlantic Crossings* (1998) about nineteenth-century connections between the United States, Britain, and Germany within the nexus of the 'North Atlantic world'. 'Every serious reader of the past instinctively knows', he wrote, '... that nations lie enmeshed in each others' history.'

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