

THE RÔLE OF THE MISSIONARY IN THE NEAR EAST

By JOHN S. BADEAU

THE modern Protestant missionary began his work in the Near East on January 14th, 1820. On that day, the Reverend Pliny Fisk and the Reverend Levi Parsons disembarked at Smyrna, Turkey, as the pioneer representatives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the 'Jews . . . pagans . . . Mohammedans . . . Christians', the people of 'Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Armenia'.

Their instructions were phrased in surprisingly modern and generous terms. 'The two grand inquiries ever present in your minds', they were told, 'will be "what good can be done?" and "by what means?"' The lack of specific directions to evangelize and convert was not because their sponsors eschewed a direct witness to the Christian Gospel, but because their concern for the Gospel was founded on a concern for people. With that concern, they were willing to leave to the missionary on the spot the task of finding specific avenues of Christian service and testimony.

In 134 years of Christian effort that have passed since then, these instructions have been given a content far beyond the vision of the original authors. While the missionary movement necessarily embraces a wide variety of religious convictions and includes many minds and programmes that are narrow in their definition of Christian activity, the 'good that can be done' has been its central concern, and the 'means of doing it' have been imaginative and varied. To-day there are over fourteen hundred Protestant missionaries in the lands of the Near East, representing some seventy-four different organizations. Their work includes almost every phase of human service—schools, orphanages, literacy campaigns, hospitals, agricultural improvement, churches.

Such a record of service would seem to be self-justifying, even on purely humanitarian grounds; yet the missionary in the Near East has often been subjected to sharp criticism. Some colonial administrators have praised his selfless devotion to the cause of humanity; others have seen in him only a threat to local religious tranquillity. Many Muslims are sincerely grateful for the missionary's contributions in the fields of health, education and social service; yet nationalist leaders accuse him of being an instrument of western imperialism, bent on destroying the religious and cultural values of the East. An opposite charge is made by some Christian Zionists:

irritated by general missionary indifference or opposition to the cause of Israel, they accuse him of surrender to Arab nationalism in the hope of winning local reputation and influence. Clearly the 'good to be done' has led the missionary into controversial ground never envisioned in the days of Parsons and Fisk.

What, then, is the rôle of the missionary in the Near East to-day? To answer this, we must recognize that the missionary always appears on the eastern scene in a double character: he is a Christian, but he is also a westerner. These two facts furnish the setting for his service and determine the kind of contribution he can make.

The missionary is a Christian working among Muslims; therefore his rôle is affected by the general nature and history of Christian-Muslim relations. These have a special character, quite distinct from Christian-Hindu or Christian-Buddhist relations. Islam belongs to the same family tree of religious development as Christianity, but it is later in date and therefore claims to be more final and complete. The Muslim reacts to the offer of Christianity as the final expression of religious truth as the Christian reacts to an invitation to embrace Judaism—it was all right in its day, but has long since been superseded.

Moreover, Islam, belonging to the stream of monotheistic faith, with a religious and moral content akin to pre-prophetic Judaism, offers less obvious and sharp contrast to Christian belief than the pantheism or nihilism of other eastern religions. Belief in a single, sovereign God, the fact of final judgment and personal immortality, the general ethical system of Semitic monotheism—to the Muslim these seem to make Islam and Christianity but variants of the same basic faith. It is chiefly in the estimate of the character and significance of Jesus that difference lies—and in the Koran, Muslim faith has already assigned its own place to Jesus.

Thus it is not strange if the appeal of Christianity to the Muslim is weak, or if missionary efforts in Muslim lands have been less productive of converts than among any other faith. Yet, despite indifference and hostility, the Christian missionary has made a distinct religious contribution to the Near East over and above his winning of converts. In the first place, he has often revitalized Muslim faith. The Protestant emphasis on personal religious experience, the criticism of religion as a formal exercise, the defence of Christian faith against the secular influences of materialism; these are often appropriated by the Muslim and incorporated in his own religious life. It is not uncommon for educated Muslims to speak of the need for a 'reformation' in Islam—indeed, one group in Syria called themselves 'Protestant Muslims'.

Again, the work and convictions of the missionary have sharply emphasized to the Near East the right of a man to make his own religious choices. This is not a basic Muslim concept; under Shari'a

law (whose principles still govern many Islamic communities) conversion is forbidden and historically carries with it the death penalty. For Islam is a community, not a personal faith, and just as the American community to-day does not recognize the right of the individual to espouse the cause of Communism (which is destructive of democracy) so Islam does not recognize the right of the individual to embrace another faith (which is destructive of Islam). This view is still strong, but the missionary, by his presence and message, is constantly raising the issue of personal freedom in religion—an issue that the Muslim world, in common with many other areas, needs.

Finally, the quickened ethical sense of modern Christianity, with its concern for current problems, is penetrating the intellectual class of the Muslim world. The Muslim ethical system as enshrined in its historic books is essentially medieval and has little to say about such questions as modern war, industrial relations, major social reforms and many aspects of modern family life. While the general influence of western thought has raised these issues for the Muslim, the mission school, hospital and institution also play an important rôle. Here the Muslim has been stimulated to consider how his religious heritage can serve the crucial issues of his day. Unconsciously, this involves the acceptance of Christian standards as the basis of judgment, so that often it is the Christian point of view that is used in discovering or heightening the moral content of Islam. This tendency is very noticeable in current publications, which, while using purely Muslim language, often unconsciously reflect the Christian moral concern.

Witness to this permeation of Christian ethical standards is borne by the noted British colonial administrator, Sir Arnold Wilson. Writing of the Persian Gulf area he observes that

. . . the disinterested, but not dispassionate zeal, and the high qualities and personal abilities of individual missionaries has, beyond all question, permeated the Arab social and religious system, and has set up standards of public conduct and personal rectitude which have been tacitly and indeed unconsciously adopted by an increasingly large body of educated men.¹

Thus, in addition to direct witness to the Christian religion and its values, the missionary plays an important religious rôle in the Muslim community, adding influences that are vitalizing and useful. The same can be said in relation to the Eastern churches. Although many of the Protestant convert groups were first drawn from these ancient bodies, and the missionary therefore appeared as a destructive and competing force, the impact of mission work has forced Eastern churches to re-think their religious heritage in much the same way as the Muslim is re-thinking his. In many Eastern churches the Scripture is now read in the vernacular,

¹ *The Persian Gulf* (Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 248.

sermons are preached, Sunday-schools are operating and the training of the clergy has been improved, through the influence and initiative of missionaries.

The second aspect of the missionary's rôle lies outside this purely religious contribution. For it is never simply a Christian missionary who witnesses or works among Muslims. It is always a western (American, British, Continental) Christian witnessing to and working among eastern (Egyptian, Palestinian, Iranian) Muslims. The tensions and contacts between western and eastern are probably even more influential and basic to the missionary rôle than the tensions between Muslim and Christian.

A simple illustration of this fact comes from the experience of a missionary in Iran. While itinerating in the provinces, he was summoned at midnight to the Governor's palace. Thinking he had broken some government regulation, the missionary hurried to the governate only to find that he had been called for the purpose of providing a western hat. It was during the régime of Reza Shah Pahlevi, whose energy was directed at a rapid modernization of the country; a peremptory telegram from the Shah's officials had reached the Governor in the evening, ordering him to appear in his office the next morning wearing a European fedora in the place of the usual Persian kalpak. Where to find a hat at midnight?—the missionary! Here the missionary was not first of all a representative of the Christian Faith, but of western culture and ways; his theology was not nearly as important a fact as his hat-wearing habits.

But the missionary's hat is more than head-covering—it is a symbol of all the cultural, ideological and social practices that inevitably accompany him and from which he cannot, if he would, dissociate himself. And around it gathers the political prestige and pressure that the West long enjoyed in the Near East—a prestige that often protected the missionary in his work and won him acceptance in suspicious communities. The good the missionary has done and the controversy he has aroused are imbedded in this matrix of western culture and practice, of which he was often the first representative.

What, then, has the missionary done as a westerner—but a westerner who is at the same time a Christian? First, he has been one of the earliest and most effective representatives of western social and humanitarian programmes. Whether for the sole purpose of conversion, or with a broad vision of human service, he has carried into many medieval communities their first experience of modern health, education and social work. Examples of this, and of its lasting value, are numerous. An Iranian's response to the large and effective United States Programme of Technical Assistance in his country (one of the best in Asia) was 'Yes, it's a good thing—but not new. This is what the missionaries have been doing here for several

decades'. The impressive development of Kuwait under its present ruler, with his vast resources of oil royalties, was possible partly because almost fifty years of missionary effort by the American Reformed Church mission had implanted in the ruling family and class the values of schools and hospitals. Generations of eastern students first found in mission schools a passion for social service; one Muslim doctor in an eastern city opened a free clinic for the poor, and when asked why he did so, answered, 'I went to a missionary school, and ever since I have been uncomfortable in the face of human need'.

This contribution of the missionary is particularly significant because the official influence of his country (especially where it was a colonial or mandating Power) often did not include a social programme. Balanced finances, good government administration, public works, defence—these were the chief objectives of the occupying western Powers. As good a colonial servant as Sir Arnold Wilson admits that 'we made nowhere, except at Abadan and on the oil fields, any attempt to establish schools or colleges . . . or to fit them [the local inhabitants] to take their place in a rapidly changing world. . . . We poured out money like water in fruitless endeavours to suppress the Arms Traffic, but grudged the comparatively trifling sums necessary for such purposes'. (*op. cit.*, p. 12.)

Thus the missionary was often not only the pioneer of humanitarian services, but their first representative from the West. He helped the East identify the West with human concern and human betterment as well as with imperial control and commercial development.

To put this fact in a broader setting: the missionary represents to the Near East a new kind of international relatedness. Other westerners came to the East to do one of two things: exercise political control or enjoy commercial advantages. For these are the two principal historic instruments of international relations; great nations that are dependent upon small nations (and someone is always dependent in the Near East), either try to control the smaller nation politically, or to trade with it. Both methods are necessary and inescapable—and, in the hands of their best leaders, productive of much human good. But both have in them the seeds of rivalry and tension, as the present political and economic resentments of the Near East too well illustrate.

What the missionary has done—imperfectly, it is true—is to illustrate a different kind of relation between East and West; one built on the recognition of human need and the desire to meet that need, simply because it is human. Not all missionaries have seen this vision, or are able to separate it from their objective of religious conversion, but where it is found it is imbedded in missionary work. The mission hospital is not simply a device to convert sick people through a service; it is also an expression of relatedness between

the medical science of the West and the needy people of the East that seeks no political or economic influence in return.

It is this atmosphere of the best missionary work that has preserved it from being completely swept away in the present anti-western and nationalist currents of the East. Despite hostile criticism, the Near East has continued to differentiate between the official governments of the western world, whose controls it increasingly resents, and such services as the missionary represents. When conflict broke out in Palestine between the Arab states and Israel, it seemed to the Arabs that they were fighting the American Government no less than Israel, for it was pressure from the American Government behind the façade of the United Nations that created Israel, and contributions from the United States that kept the nation alive—to say nothing of some American citizens who led the Israeli fighting forces. Yet groups of refugee Arab students turned to the American schools and colleges of the Near East (almost all missionary in origin) to continue their interrupted education, recognizing that, though American, they were not representative of, or involved in, the political policies of the United States Government.

In the same way, almost the only British organization to survive the oil crisis in Iran was the Church Missionary Society. Recently Bishop W. J. Thompson (Anglican Bishop in Iran) described this by saying :

Practically the only British institution which survived the political storm [in Iran]—was the Missionary Society, and the churches which grew up as a result of its work. Of course it did not survive unscathed, because missionaries who were out of the country could not get visas to return, as was the case with all other British people. I do hope the fact of our survival means that the people and the government recognize that we have no political axe to grind and are in no way connected with any political activities whatever. (*Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Apr. 1954, p. 129.)

All this is possible because missionaries enter into Near Eastern life more deeply and sympathetically than any other western group. Expecting to spend his entire career in the area, learning the language of the people, devoted to a task involving daily contact with the local community and its customs, standing apart from the political and commercial interests of the West, the missionary gets inside eastern life as few other foreigners can. And this is not a deliberate policy of ingratiating, but the natural result of Christian dedication to and identification with the people who are so often classified merely as 'natives' by other representatives of the West.

Because of this, missionaries frequently identify themselves more completely with the hopes and aspirations of the East (in which they work) than of the West (which they represent). Such movements as nationalism, the struggle against western colonialism and the drive for economic self-determination have, on the whole, been understood

and accepted more sympathetically by the missionary than by any other foreigner. At times this irritates the western administrator or propagandist, who is taken aback when 'his own people' do not support western policies. What he fails to realize and accept is that the missionary, naturally and rightly, tends to see the situation as the local community sees it and not as it relates to the furtherance of western policy.

This is a highly important function. Too long have the western Powers approached the Near East primarily as the scene of their own interests—defence, commercial development or a solution to the anti-Semitic problem of the Christian world. While such interests have validity and are generally involved in international relations, they cannot be made the exclusive concern of the West in its contacts with the Near East. The missionary's presence, understanding local aspirations and interpreting them to the western world, is a badly needed corrective to the partial and western-orientated views that so often are the only side of the situation to be publicized.

To put it more simply: there are two sides to every question of western-eastern contacts, and when the missionary (consciously or unconsciously) speaks with sympathetic interpretation of the East, he is doing both it, and his own western people, an indispensable service.

What, then, is the rôle of the missionary in the Near East? First, he is a Christian, witnessing to his faith, embodying it in deeds of imaginative service, by his presence and message energizing all the forces of personal religion. Then, he is a westerner, whose Christian dedication leads him deeply into eastern life, bringing new expressions of human relatedness and entering with sympathy and understanding into the life of the people whom he serves.

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