Networks of Power

American Presbyterians and the Use of Girls' Education in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Egypt

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The presence of colonial powers in Egypt throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries contributed significantly to reforms impactful to the lives of Egyptian women. In particular, American Presbyterian missionaries are credited by some scholars as critical to the Egyptian trajectory to modernity through their prioritization of girls' education. Though illiteracy and lack of education plagued both girls and boys in Egyptian society, the missionaries championed the education of the former, placing women at the forefront of their efforts in Egypt. At the surface, this activism suggests that the missionaries sought to liberate Egyptian women by providing them with equal opportunity to engage in the intellectual development of the colonial period. However, an examination of the American Presbyterians reveals that evangelical networks of power motivated the initiative for girls' education. The inferior status of women in the American Presbyterian context suggests that the liberation of women was not the factor that motivated girls' education in Egypt. Rather, this paper will argue that girls' education became a tool by which to subvert Islam, and inculcate instead an evangelical ethos, priming each Egyptian girl to become the idealized domestic, American Presbyterian woman.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Egypt experienced a flood of curious travellers. For foreigners, the idea of Egypt was incredibly captivating and inspired expeditions and vacations that ranged in motivation.¹ For some, Egypt held political and economic importance, in that the country offered a way to dominate trade

with the East. In the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, Napoleon deemed Egypt "the most important country in the world," as it secured his position in the lucrative Oriental trade routes.² This political and economic significance was further compounded by the building of the Suez Canal from 1854 to 1869, perpetuating the colonial interest in the "undiscovered" country.³ For others, particularly in the 1800s, Egypt assumed a romantic role in the hearts and minds of those captivated by "things Egyptian."⁴ According to Islamic scholar Jeffrey Burke, the adventure, history, and geography of Egypt enchanted popular interest. Egypt was a paradise with something to offer the imaginations of all those subsumed by the insatiable desire for the exotic Orient.⁵ The bright sun and dry climate offered health benefits, the ancient hieroglyphics offered an opportunity to establish a true list of Pharaonic kings, the countless artifacts offered mint condition pieces for European museums, and so forth.⁶

Most importantly, in this wave of travellers, Egypt offered a vast population of "heathens" to be converted by eager Christian missionaries.⁷ These missionaries came from a variety of denominations and traditions, often differing in tactics and goals. For the purpose of this paper, the American Presbyterian emphasis on the establishment of schools, clinics, and other outreach institutions will be considered. However, regardless of the denominational tactic, what was unanimous amongst Christian interlopers was the fervor that motivated their work. Nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant missionaries preached according to the tenets of 'apocalyptic

millenarianism,' which dictated that the end of the world was imminent, and that the prophesied golden age of the earth could be hastened.⁸ This golden age could be established through a universal adherence to Protestant Christianity, which was bound in Victorian values and ideals. Therefore, the goal of the Protestant missionaries was to convert the entire world to their interpretation of Christianity.⁹ Indeed, this lofty goal was believed to be within reach in the nineteenth century. Burke states that American students of divinity in the 1800s were convinced that they would see the entire world become Christian in their lifetimes.¹⁰ When this belief merged with the glamorous depictions of the Middle East, domestic efforts to convert the heathen North Americans was replaced by a dispatchment of missions to Egypt.¹¹

Egypt posed a particularly difficult challenge for the zealous missionaries. The American Presbyterians arriving in 1854 initially intended to convert the majority Muslim population to Christianity, understanding the country to be "the heart and soul of Islam."¹² Islam troubled the Americans for two reasons. On the one hand, Islam was a competing missionary force in the "dark [African] continent."¹³ In other words, the Islamic presence in the Middle East was a glaring challenge to the Protestant dream of a Christian universe. This was particularly difficult due to the various social and legal barriers in Islamic law that prevented conversion to Christianity.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Christian missionaries understood Islam according to Orientalist assumptions of Eastern inferiority, pointing to the veiling of women and harem seclusion as indicative of a backwards and suppressive religion.¹⁵ Yet, despite their assumed superiority, the Americans were unsuccessful in converting the Egyptian Muslims. Instead, they refocused their attention to the minority Coptic Christian population of Egypt, which they argued was "erroneous" and even "un-Christian."¹⁶ According to the missionaries' Protestant legacy, the rituals, traditions, and ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Coptic Church proved reminiscent of Roman Catholicism.¹⁷ Thus, the evangelicals

devoted themselves to converting the Copts from this corrupted Christianity to an evangelical understanding of the Christian faith.¹⁸

Historian Alissa Walter argues that the Protestant understanding of the Christian faith propagated by the American Presbyterians was most influential on the women of nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt.¹⁹ Though their work was largely unsuccessful in terms of conversion rates, Walter maintains that the American Presbyterians' establishment of schools, clinics, and other institutions motivated Coptic Christian women to demand similar institutions in their own communities.²⁰ In other words, Egyptian women were able to utilize the social benefits posed by the missionaries without necessarily adopting the Protestant gospel. Walter parallels her argument to that of Islamic scholar Leila Ahmed in *Women and Gender in Islam*, which argues that Christian missionaries played a key role in popularizing female institutions, sparking a debate over the changing role and purpose of Egyptian women in a modernizing and colonized society.²¹ For Walter and Ahmed, both Christian and Muslim Egyptian women were able to benefit from missionary presence, which elevated their status in social and political frameworks. Christian missionary institutions, particularly those of the American Presbyterians, thus helped to shake off the weight of tradition and ritual that had stagnated Egyptian progression towards modernity and seemed to disadvantage the women.²²

Walter and Ahmed suggest that the missionaries were critical to the process of reform and revival in Egyptian society. According to historian Paul Sedra, the portrayal of missionaries as catalysts of reform is a "familiar narrative in the traditional historiography of the Christian mission in the Middle East."²³ In some ways, this narrative helps to explain the feminist movement in Egypt as colonial powers did introduce foreign concepts that forced a re-evaluation of practices unfavourable to women. This was particularly true of the American Presbyterian initiatives. According to Burke,

American Presbyterian missions in the nineteenth-century were often led by a spirit of concrete action rooted in the revivalism and voluntarism of the Second Great Awakening. This spirit prompted a socially oriented approach that delivered a Christian message via institutions such as mission schools or hospitals.²⁴ However, these action initiatives were tied to a message of eternal damnation for all those who chose to reject the message of Christianity.²⁵ In other words, offering these services – which were badly needed in Egypt – was a way to both purport the inherent institutional superiority of the “Western way,” as well as deliver the Christian message.²⁶ This spirit of concrete action was responsible for doubling the number of Egyptian schools from 1885 to 1895 (from 59 to 110), as well as the opening of the first Egyptian girls’ school in 1856.²⁷

The concrete action of the American Presbyterians prioritized women emphatically, further contributing to the catalyst missionary narrative identified by Sedra. According to Walter, the American Presbyterians placed Egyptian women at the heart of their efforts, and provided female education in ways that Anglican missionaries only pledged rhetorically.²⁸ Walter notes that prior to the nineteenth-century, few Egyptian girls were educated formally or extensively. Basic literacy relied on some community-based religious education, which involved memorizing passages from the Bible or the Qur’an.²⁹ Despite this exclusion of girls from formal education institutions, Walter maintains that illiteracy was widespread in general, regardless of gender.³⁰ Yet, it was the girls who garnered the special attention of the missionaries.³¹ Indeed, according to missionary Andrew Watson, the Western interlocutors were especially troubled by the apparent lack of interest among Egyptian men in educating or elevating the women.³² He stated that when the missionaries “fully realized the condition of the women in Egypt,” they were immediately sympathetic, desiring to do something for them.³³ Watson purported that the obvious solution was “that the girls should be taught and schools should be established for them.”³⁴ In other words, for the American Presbyterians, Egyptian women had

been neglected by their society and thus deserved special attention from the missionaries. According to the philosophy of concrete action, girls’ schooling was identified as the solution to the condition of Egyptian women, becoming characteristic of the American Presbyterian mission into the twentieth-century.

The American Presbyterian emphasis on girls’ education likely did contribute significantly to the shift to modernity that Walter and Ahmed suggest liberated Egyptian women. As Walter herself states, it must be “emphatically stated that the American missionaries...were not the sole or even primary actors affecting the educational...opportunities for [Egyptian] women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”³⁵ Although the missionaries deserve credit for establishing several important institutions that increased the standard of girls’ education in Egypt, attributing the liberation of Egyptian women solely to the missionaries is an oversimplification of the situation. According to Sedra, this narrative of Christian missionaries as catalysts for reform in the Middle East is problematic, “for under a mask of objectivity, [it] reveals networks of power.”³⁶ We cannot, by modern standards, assume that the missionaries were “disinterested do-gooders,” even if they did provide badly needed services.³⁷ In order to reveal the networks of power that motivated the emphasis on girls’ education, the cultural bias and context must be examined.

A consideration of the culture of nineteenth and twentieth century American Presbyterians reveals a context that was not exactly conducive to the liberation of women into the public sphere via education. In the mid-1870s, American missionary bases struggled with the expansion of women’s roles in the church, as well as the increasing cry for leadership avenues within Presbyterian communities.³⁸ Scholar Frederick Heuser suggests that an unofficial Presbyterian liberation theology – premised on salvation, domestic tranquility, and endless happiness – was expressed by Presbyterian women, who believed that they should be free to participate in liberation efforts in the East to liberate

the women they saw oppressed there.³⁹ Women of what Heuser terms the “Church Women’s Decade” felt increasingly compelled to carry the gospel message themselves, especially on missions to save their heathen sisters in the Middle East.⁴⁰ Yet, they were restricted by their inferior status in the denominational hierarchy and American society.⁴¹ In other words, American Presbyterians themselves were struggling to negotiate a role for women in their communities, imposing an American suppression of women that prevented liberation into positions of intellectual equality with men. Therefore, the American missionaries did not intend to liberate Egyptian women from a position of inferiority via education, despite their emphasis on girls’ education, because this was a concept contrary to the American reality of male-dominated power structures.

As we cannot credit the American emphasis on girls’ education to a genuine desire to liberate women via education, Presbyterian ideas of women must be examined for the ‘networks of power’ Sedra suggests. The networks of power motivating the missionary emphasis on girls’ education involves three related concepts. Firstly, the American Presbyterians postured their initiatives in an Orientalist gaze. According to Burke, the missionaries “created their own Orient” on their expeditions to the East.⁴² This constructed Orient identified Islam as the culprit for un-Christian mores and beliefs. Coupled with their desire to out-convert the expanding Islamic religion, missionaries quickly surmised that Egyptian women—both Muslim and Christian—were suffering from the misogynistic influence of Islam, polluting the remnants of Christianity in Egypt.⁴³ For example, Watson suggested that Egyptian women differed from the American women in their moral, intellectual and social inferiority, which was a product of the suspicions of the Orient.⁴⁴ These Oriental suspicions and inferiorities were understood as the product of interaction with Islam. He elaborated in another account that the Egyptian Christians seemed to have “adopted in their homes many of the social habits of the Muhammadans [Muslims] and have

become thoroughly filled with Muhammadan ideas of women’s inferiority and woman’s special depravity.”⁴⁵ Therefore, for the missionaries, a restoration of Egyptian Christianity meant weeding out the “heathen customs” encouraged by Islam that “offended the Western concept of family and individual self-dignity.”⁴⁶

To challenge and subvert the effects of Islam, missionaries championed girls’ education as a panacea to all they had diagnosed as an illness of the Orient. Where Orientalist Islam isolated and veiled women, Christian education promised to “purify and elevate their character, developing their minds, [making them] zealous and efficient in Christian work.”⁴⁷ Thus, the education of women in the Orient symbolized the liberation of women from the guises of Islam. As Egyptian communities became increasingly divided on the question of Western modernization and time-bound traditions, the American Presbyterian promise of girls’ education became an effective tool for categorizing Islamic practices as backwards and uneducated. This resonated with Egyptian intellectual discourse of the 1880s and 1920s which explicitly associated gender and nationhood.⁴⁸ The oppressed, veiled Oriental woman became symbolic of the Egyptian nation; both were uneducated and restricted by the religious rigidity of the country. To modernize the nation, a Western education was necessary, simultaneously requiring a rejection of the religion that was purported to have caused the inferiority of the Oriental woman to begin with. Therefore, educating the women became an expression of the broader initiative for educating and liberating the Egyptian nation, repudiating Islam in the process.

Secondly, coupled with this subversion of Islam to liberate the Egyptian nation, girls’ education offered a means by which the Presbyterian “evangelical ethos” could be inculcated in the Egyptian nation. This “ethos,” described by Sedra, meant a subscription to the Protestant values of “industry, discipline, and order.”⁴⁹ In other words, the American Presbyterians missionized not only an evangelical dogma, but also a particular way of life

in the Protestant West. In effect, education became the vehicle for proselytizing this evangelical ethos because of the particular philosophy of education espoused by the missionaries. This missionary education philosophy, termed the Lancastrian model, adhered to a colonization strategy that refused to attack Egyptian traditions as institutions, but rather sought elaborate social control by monitoring and molding the youth of society.⁵⁰ Monitoring and molding the youth became a way for the missionaries to ingrain values that traditional Coptic and Islamic adults rejected.⁵¹ The belief was that ingrainng evangelical values in school settings enabled Presbyterian thought to rise through the social ranks at home, infiltrating practices in a more subtle way.⁵² Furthermore, by affecting the psyche of the children, evangelicals were able to ensure the continuation of their ethos for the Egyptian future.

The Oriental gaze of the American Presbyterians meant that the Lancastrian model for indoctrination was especially important for Egyptian girls. According to an 1839 missionary account, "It is in the hearts of the Oriental females, that superstition has erected her strongest bulwarks. The women are therefore the best tools in the hands of the priesthood...particularly in respect to the education of children."⁵³ Watson echoes this, reporting that the Egyptian women were "utterly ignorant...under a cloud of superstitions which affect their souls, their bodies, their marital, family and social relations."⁵⁴ This suggests that the power networks motivating the American Presbyterian emphasis on girls' education was not focused on the education of women in and of itself, but rather the ways girls' education could serve as a socio-political tool for the continuation of their evangelical agenda. Educating the girls represented an opportunity to uproot Islamic practices where they were most deeply embedded, as well as to control society at large by ingrainng an evangelical ethos in the psyche of the girls. For the missionaries, the 'illnesses' of the Orient were most acute in the women; therefore, indoctrinating the girls simultaneously secured evangelical values for the

future and uprooted the Islamic influences they sought to subvert in the place where they seemed to have their strongest hold.

Lastly, the American Presbyterian construction of the ideal Christian woman was a significant motivator of girls' education in Egypt. According to scholar Louisa Moffitt, the American Presbyterians understood the ideal woman according to a type of "Christian domesticity."⁵⁵ The ideal woman, referred to by Moffitt as part of the assumptions of the popular "cult of domesticity," was viewed as physically and mentally weaker than a man, but at the same time, morally superior.⁵⁶ This moral superiority meant that women were perfect for raising children and supervising the home, being that they were of the moral quality to cultivate goodness in the next generation.⁵⁷ This was compounded by the effects of the American Revolution, which enforced a concept of "republican motherhood" which "urged women to raise a new generation of good citizens."⁵⁸ In turn, these ideas fostered commitment to facilitating women's domesticity for the sake of an evangelical household. Commitment to this is also reflected in the missionary accounts in Egypt. According to Watson, women's prayer meetings were held in the daytime, a time when women were less encumbered by domestic obligations to their families.⁵⁹ As such, American Presbyterians educated girls to become the morally superior republican mothers which they identified as critical to the continuation of evangelical doctrine in the Presbyterian home. Women were understood as responsible for maintaining the evangelical ethos in their homes. Therefore, if the Presbyterians anticipated a continuation of their ideas in Egypt, it was the girls' education that needed to be prioritized.

These three motivations — a subversion of Islam, an inculcation of the evangelical ethos, and the creation of the idealized domestic, American Presbyterian woman — are easily masked by the presumed role American education played in the liberation of Egyptian women. By emphasizing the inculcation of the evangelical ethos in the girls,

American Presbyterians condescended Egyptian women per their assumptions of Oriental inferiority. They confined and subjected Egyptian women to a particular conception of women, repudiating the avenues of power they held in their own cultures prior to missionary interference. Furthermore, the missionaries objectified the women, using them as tools for their broader evangelical and socio-political motives. Though they were not always successful in their efforts, the impact of this indoctrination on female students is evident. For example, Sedra notes that the mothers of various Egyptian families complained to the missionary teachers “that their daughters [had] reproved them, when they...heard them, according to the prevailing custom of this country, swearing, or cursing, by telling them: O! Mother you sin, the Lord Jesus Christ forbids you to swear.”⁶⁰ This example shows that the missionaries were successful in using the Egyptian women as a tool to extend their evangelical values and perspectives on Christian morality into the household in the broader scheme of girls’ education.

Alternatively, it is also important to credit the ways that the American Presbyterian emphasis on girls’ education was beneficial to Egyptian society. Despite the colonialist and Orientalist networks of power at play in the initiative for girls’ education, the concrete action of the Presbyterians did pose an objective benefit to Egyptian society. According to Walter, there were 7,975 students attending the American Presbyterian mission schools by the end of the nineteenth century.⁶¹ Missionary schools were an immediate success in Egypt amongst upper class and urban families, despite the obvious conflict with regard to religious subversion.⁶² Many girls, albeit only the very privileged, were the beneficiaries of educational opportunities that significantly contributed to the forthcoming feminist movements in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt.⁶³ Presbyterian missionaries were, despite their mixed success in terms of conversions, fundamental in improving literacy in Egypt, particularly among females.⁶⁴ However, this does not detract from the fact that the motivations and

agendas of the Presbyterians must be revealed when they are credited with liberating the women of nineteenth and twentieth-century Egypt. The power networks behind their concrete action initiatives were indeed at play in Egyptian society in the colonial period and should be considered when evaluating the role of the missionaries in modernizing Egypt.

The missionary presence in colonial Egypt was an important influence on a social upheaval that would come to elevate Egyptian women in new ways. In particular, the American Presbyterians contributed to the prioritization of girls’ education, and Egyptian education and social services more generally, allowing a generation of women to profit from Western education. However, as this essay has demonstrated, it is idealistic to assume that the championing of girls’ education was, in and of itself, for the liberation of Egyptian women. An evaluation of the American Presbyterian context suggests that the missionaries were less concerned with empowering Egyptian women, and more concerned with subverting Islam, forwarding an evangelical ethos, and constructing the idealized American Presbyterian woman. Though this endeavor offered the inherent benefits of the concrete action institutions of the American Presbyterians, it represents a condescension of Middle Eastern women as per the biases of Orientalism. In effect, girls’ education objectified women in that they became a tool in the power networks of American Presbyterian initiatives. Recognizing this is important in critically evaluating the impact of missionaries, shaping a more nuanced understanding of the roles and status of women in the Middle East.

ENDNOTES:

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3. Heather J. Sharkey, "American Presbyterians, Freedmen's Missions, and the Nile Valley: Missionary History, Racial Orders, and Church Politics on the World Stage," *Journal of Religious History* 35, no. 1 (Mar., 2011): 25.
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5. Ibid., 12-13.
6. Ibid., 12-13, 23, 52; Sedra, 227; Samir Seikaly, "Coptic Communal Reform: 1860-1914," *Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no. 3 (Oct., 1970): 269.
7. Sedra, 223.
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11. Sharkey, 26.
12. Burke, 87; Alissa Walter, "A minority within a minority: A history of women in the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox and Evangelical churches (1854-present)," 19.
13. Burke, 18-19.
14. Febe Armanios, "The 'Virtuous Woman': Images of Gender in Modern Coptic Society," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 1 (Jan., 2002): 82.
15. Burke, 87; Christine Sproul, "The American College for Girls, Cairo, Egypt: Its History and Influence on Egyptian Women. A Study of Selected Graduates," (PhD diss., University of Utah, 1982): 16; Walter, 1-4, 19-20, 46.
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21. Ibid., 104.
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28. Ibid., 19-20, 49-50.
29. Ibid., 16.
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31. Burke, 3.
32. Andrew Watson, *American Mission in Egypt: 1854-1906* (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Education, 1904): 437.
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38. Frederick John Jr. Heuser, "Culture, feminism, and the Gospel: American Presbyterian women and foreign missions, 1870-1923," (PhD diss., Temple University, 1991): 6-7.
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43. Walter, 19-20.
44. Watson, 436.
45. Ibid.
46. Heuser, 12.
47. Carter, 31-32.
48. Armanios, 113.
49. Sedra, 222.
50. Ibid., 228.
51. Burke, 130.
52. Sedra, 239.
53. Ibid., 232.
54. Watson, 436.
55. Louisa Bond Moffitt, "Anna Young Thompson: American missionary, cultural ambassador, and reluctant feminist in Egypt, 1872-1932," (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2003): 5.
56. Ibid., 49.
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59. Watson, 298.
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