Abstract: Modern Religious Missions: Western Imperialism or Natural Competition?

By Laurel McCormack

A global resurgence of religious belief is underway, affecting individual, group, and national identity and interactions. This religious resurgence led to the true globalization of Christianity and Islam, and has led to new trends and changes in Christian and Islamic “mission” movements. In the past, religious missions were often viewed as a strictly Western Christian phenomenon, historically associated by Muslims with cultural, religious, and political imperialism. However, Islam and Christianity have become the two most active and important missionary religions. This development has raised concern as two religions with a historically acrimonious relationship now increasingly come into contact. Current trends in religious propagation have the ability to lead to two opposing situations: (1) heightened tension and conflict leading to a true “clash of civilizations” between Western Christianity and Islam, as Samuel Huntington decried was inevitable; or (2) increased knowledge, understanding, and acceptance with the potential for coexistence and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities and entities, with a theoretical basis in Harlan Cleveland and Marc Luyckx’s Transmodern Hypothesis.

With no existing body of academic work focusing on the cultural and political implications and impacts of modern mission activity across multiple religions, my research begins by gathering the definitions of religious proselytism as delineated by Christianity and Islam. I then analyze emerging trends and changes within each religion that are aimed at increasing the spread of beliefs or countering the spread of other religions’ beliefs. Based on these trends, my research seeks to predict whether the globalization of religious missions will lead to a more conflicted or simply a more diverse and spiritual world.
When I began my research on modern trends in Christian and Islamic proselytism, it will suffice to say that I doubted that Mercer University libraries would offer the necessary resources to facilitate completion of such a global topic. To add to this difficulty, there is no existing body of academic work on the cultural and political impacts of modern mission activity across multiple religions, as this is a fairly new field of international and multidisciplinary study. However, Mercer library resources, combined with supplementary research components, allowed me not only to complete my first project but also to continue work on this topic.

I began my research with little idea of what Islamic da’wah even was, let alone modern practices and implications of religious proselytism. I began with a research consultation with Mrs. Liya Deng, the political science subject librarian, in the beginning of the 2010 fall semester. She gave me a virtual “tour” of the databases Mercer subscribes to and demonstrated how best to use word and phrase combinations to find the most relevant articles for my topic. For example, when we were unable to find sources using the phrase, “Islamic da’wah,” she made a list of related phrases such as “Muslim mission movements” that revealed many more options. Throughout the research process, I explored hundreds of word and subject combinations, with EBSCOhost, ProQuest Religion, and ATLA Religion producing the most reliable and fruitful searches. I also found myself eternally grateful for Mercer’s subscription to online journals such as the International Bulletin of Missionary Research. Many times, journal issues centered on a theme, and after finding one relevant article through a database, I would comb through the entire journal issue, finding many more related articles which did not appear directly in my subject searches. I sometimes found relevant articles through a simple Google search, and in almost every instance, could use my Mercer student ID number or Galileo password to read these articles without paying a fee. It was sometimes necessary to use online news reports from sources such as the Washington Post and British Broadcasting Company, for I found that many of the trends I was identifying in religious mission implications had not yet been written about and published in online databases and journals. I used such reports to provide the most current examples of the trends I identified. Much of my task was in synthesizing information that scholars had not yet put together to draw new conclusions.

I realized early during the research process that while online databases and journals were paramount in providing me with published, scholarly proof of the latest trends and changes in missions, such sources usually gave small, concentrated slices of larger processes and ideas; printed books gave far more detailed and yet wide-ranging backgrounds to religious mission trends, and I began checking out backpack-full after backpack-full. At first, I had difficulty in finding relevant books; upon recommendation from my adviser, I met with Dr. David Gushee of Mercer University, who worked through my research theories and advised me during the process. He referred me to Dr. David King of Emory University. King allowed me to read and cite his recently written and published article on Muslim missionary movements in America, which was not yet available in print. I began to understand how professors and scholars make and maintain academic connections and partnerships based on their topics of research in order to advance and refine their own work. King also suggested many books and anthologies, some of which were available at Tarver and others which I was able to transfer from the Swilley Library in Atlanta. I read, marked, and cited relevant chapters in each of these
books and formed a concrete theoretical and historical framework for the modern mission trends I cited and analyzed. Throughout the process, I regularly met with and reported to Dr. Eimad Houry, who was my ongoing research adviser and editor.

I first presented my paper at the Georgia Political Science Association Conference. I am continuing to edit, adapt, and refine my research for future presentation and potential publication. Dr. Gushee and Dr. King have agreed to review my research and make suggestions on future potential directions. I also traveled to Saudi Arabia during the winter break and discovered a new world of non-western research and literature which I hope to incorporate into my research. Lastly, I have already found several new books on religious dialogue on Tarver's shelves, which I am itching to read and incorporate.
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Introduction

A global resurgence of religious belief is underway, affecting individual, group, and national identity and interactions. This religious resurgence led to the true globalization of Christianity and Islam, and has led to new trends and changes in Christian and Islamic “mission” movements. In the past, religious missions were often viewed as a strictly Western Christian phenomenon, historically associated by Muslims with cultural, religious, and political imperialism. However, Islam and Christianity have become the two most active and important missionary religions. This development has raised concern as two religions with a historically acrimonious relationship now increasingly come into contact. Current trends in religious propagation have the ability to lead to two opposing situations: (1) heightened tension and conflict leading to a true “clash of civilizations” between Western Christianity and Islam, as Samuel Huntington decried was inevitable; or (2) increased knowledge, understanding, and acceptance with the potential for coexistence and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities and entities, with a theoretical basis in Harlan Cleveland and Marc Luyckx’s Transmodern Hypothesis.

Missiologists have given much attention to the globalization of Christianity and its implications for missions. Several prominent missiologists have even gone so far as to predict changes and increased tension in Muslim relations due to each religion’s growth and mission practices, implying an acceptance of the inevitability of Huntington’s clash (Walls qtd. in Wuthnow 2009, 37; Jenkins 2007, 197). However, little academic research exists on modern trends in Islamic da’wa and even less attention has been given to analyzing how specific mission trends within both religions will shape Muslim-Christian relations. My research is far from a comprehensive study of every aspect of modern mission activity within Christianity and Islam; I seek only to present the changing nature of Christianity and Islam and to investigate the missionary trends most likely to impact these religions’ relations, exploring the possible resulting implications for their relationship.

A Clash or Coexistence?

The current religious resurgence (and the academic acceptance and study of this resurgence) is a recent phenomenon. From the end of World War II until the 1980s, Western social science theorists
analyzed the international system using the secularization thesis as one of several basic assumptions about state behavior. This thesis posited that “both religion and piety are destined universally to become only private matters; consequently, religion would no longer be an important public actor” (Haynes 2007, 8-9). However, a “near-global religious resurgence” began in the 1980s that proved theorists dead wrong; “Much current evidence suggests not that religion’s influence is declining in line with claims of secularization theory but rather that its social and, in some cases, political influence is growing in many parts of the world” (Haynes 2007, 19).

A new social theory called “the Transmodern Hypothesis” rose in light of this resurgence, based on Harlan Cleveland and Marc Luyckx’s observations that the world is moving beyond secularization of politics and society into a new era in which “religion—defined as organized spirituality,” increasingly affects governance, and “individual spirituality” is becoming a critical component of leadership at every level. The hypothesis asserts, “A transmodern way of thinking is now emerging. It features a creative mix of rational and intuitive brainwork...[and] a new openness to spiritual guidance as a basis for ‘private’ behavior and ‘public’ policy” (Cleveland and Luyckx 1999, Non-Western Approaches).

Recent statistical studies on adherents to world religions provide firm evidence for a religious resurgence in many parts of the world (Moghadam 2003, 3). Islam is and is predicted to remain the world’s fastest growing religion well into the 21st century, with an increasingly high conversion rate. Christianity is the world’s largest religion, having remained a steady 30 percent of the world population for the past 100 years. Christianity has transformed from a largely Western religion to the world’s most universal religion, with adherents making up the majority of two thirds of all countries in the world (Moghadam 2003, 6-8, 10). All of these trends are partial results of and have implications for religious missions.

Christianity and Islam have long been regarded as the world’s two strongest “missionary” religions, meaning that each has “as an intrinsic part of its raison d’etre the proclamation of its precepts to persons unfamiliar with them, in the hope that some—if not all—of those persons will adopt these tenets as their own” (Poston 1992, 2). Up to this point, I have used the term, “missions,” loosely. However,
“missions” has decidedly Christian connotations. Even if it did not, the two religions differ on definitions of “missions,” making it necessary to briefly coin and define both religions’ activities aimed at spreading or renewing its religious community. Acts of Christian proselytism are commonly called “missions.” As used in this paper, missions are defined as the intentional works of Christian churches or agencies, especially across ethno-linguistic boundaries, that seek to proclaim Christianity to non-Christians with the purpose of influencing them to become part of the Christian community (Fisher 1982, 4; Park 2007, 4). The closest Islamic equivalent of Christian missions is the concept of “da’wa” or “da’wah,” translated as “a call” or “an invitation” to Islam, or “in specialized usage, ‘missionary activity’” (Poston 1993, 3). When referring to collective religious proselytism, I will use the phrase “missionary activity.”

Religious beliefs increasingly affect world-view, including how individuals relate to the family, law, education, society, and politics. Some academics believe that this increase in religious contact is leading to “culture wars,” or “conflicts between people, ethnic groups, classes, and nations framed in religious terms” (Haynes 2007, 86). Such culture wars are made worse when both Christian and Islamic missions are carried out using “exclusive accounts of the nature of reality,” that is only their beliefs are regarded as true beliefs” (Kurtz qtd. in Haynes 2007, 85). Such claims can be “a serious challenge to religious toleration and diversity, essential to our coexistence in a globalized world” (Haynes 2007, 85). Belief in culture wars aligns with Samuel Huntington’s prediction of the Clash of Civilizations.

Huntington stated that in the globalizing world, conflict would primarily be between civilizations, “cultural entities” that form around different shared aspects. The most important differentiation between these civilizations is religion, with special attention given to a likely future clash between Western (or as presented in another of his articles, Western Christian) and Islamic civilizations. As these civilizations increasingly interact, he predicts conflict on multiple levels, which will include “competitively promot[ing] their particular political and religious values” (Huntington 1993, 29). Therefore, Huntington saw religion as a likely, if not the strongest, source of conflict between civilizations, especially between Islam and Western Christianity, and would certainly view an increase in religious missions as an increase in the likelihood of conflict between civilizations.
Kurtz and Huntington share a fundamental assumption that religions are so inherently different that they are unlikely to peacefully coexist in a globalizing world, either by nature or by choice. An opposing theory that predicts religious coexistence is found in transmodernization. The transmodern hypothesis asserts that a new way of thinking is emerging, featuring “a tolerance, even celebration, of diversity.” This mindset “acknowledges that all civilizations need to be receptive to that which is alien... It is open to the transcendental, while resisting any authoritarian imposition of religious certainty. The Truth is at the center of things; each person converges toward it through his/her own culture, along his/her own path” (Cleveland and Luyckx 1999: Non-Western Approach). Cleveland and Luyckx cited studies that proved a substantial “global mind change” towards values and views outlined in their hypothesis.

Because of this shift in worldview, Cleveland and Luyckx hypothesized that in the coming century, the most serious conflicts will not be between religious cultures, but rather within them (the latter assertion will not be explored here). A missional method of “deep toleration” is in keeping with the transmodern hypothesis: “Restrictions on the right to proselytize threaten to choke off interreligious dialogue. Deep toleration—an encounter among religious individuals and groups that is open to transformation—represents a just and workable foundation for peaceful engagement in a spirit of truth” (Elshtain 103, 2008).

Although theoretical hypotheses are helpful as a framework in understanding religious interactions, they are only made useful when used with concrete examples. In order to understand the present and future relationship between Christianity and Islam, we will briefly review how the historic role of missions has helped create enmity between Christians and Muslim. We will also look at recent growth and change in Christianity and Islam that have important implications for their relationship. Most importantly, we will analyze emerging missionary trends each religion focused towards the other in order to better understand and predict the role of missions in creating either more conflicted or more peaceful Muslim-Christian relations.

**Western Colonial Missionaries to Muslims**
Christianity has historically used aggressive evangelization towards Muslims, often supported by Western colonialism. Biblical support for Christian world evangelism is found in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (NIV 2008, 1134). From the beginning of its history as a religion and especially throughout the second millennium, Christianity sought to spread its beliefs worldwide, viewing the task as a divine commission. Historical resentment between Christians and Muslims stemmed from the Christian military crusades against Muslims in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries.

Throughout the colonial age, Christian missions were directed from the West to the rest of the world based on a paternalistic model of proselytism featuring a disregard for native culture and beliefs. More specifically, Christian missionaries “believed that Western Christianity [was] the only authentic expression of true Christianity… and required [non-Western converts] to imitate it as much as possible. They could not tolerate any spontaneous expressions of Christianity by the non-Western churches” (Whole Issue Group 2004, 31). The spread of Christianity during this time was based on Western Christian exclusivist truth claims and mission practices. Under the “paternalistic model” of missions, non-Western converts were expected not only to accept Christian doctrine, but were also often pressured to adopt Western Christian cultural practices, including church building styles, church hierarchy, worship, and proselytism. Even worse, Western missionaries in Muslim areas denigrated and defamed Islam (Sharkey 2004, 100).

More importantly, throughout the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, “Europeans especially were guilty of combining missionary activities with imperialism and colonialism,” renewing or lapsing missionary efforts towards Muslims to support and supplement Western colonial agendas in India, the Middle East, and Africa, and to combat perceived increased Islamic influence in any areas of colonial interest (Walls qtd. in Wuthnow 2009: 37; Porter 2008, 77). Indeed, “of forty-two Muslim countries, only four did not experience direct military control by outsiders during the colonial experience, a humiliating experience for many Muslims in which Islam was derided and Islamic political and social structures were
attacked by Western conquerors” (Kurtz 1995, 143). In many Muslims’ minds, Christianity and Christian missions became tied with Western political, cultural, and religious imperialism.

Early in the 20th century, American Christians took up the missionary mantle, sending the most foreign missionaries of any country in the world by 1910. American missionaries, “operated outside a formal European or American colonial setting but at the same time drew their strength from Western colonialism,” the basis for a lasting view of American missionaries as imperialistic and politically-motivated (Makdisi 2008, 176). Non-Western churches were beginning to act out against colonialism, indigenizing their churches and focusing on the three-self model of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation, thereby lessening dependency on Western missions (Whole Issue Group 2004, 32; Jenkins 2007, 80). In the era of de-colonization, many countries shut their doors to Christian missionaries and missionary personnel were cut back; that period was misread as the beginning of the decline of Christianity, unwelcome in much of the non-Western world as its influence waned in Europe and stagnated in America (Robert 2008, 124).

The Non-Western Face of Global Christianity

Over the past few decades, Western Christianity has indeed faded from prominence; however, non-Western (or Southern) Christianity has emerged vibrantly and rapidly. Southern Christianity emerged after decolonization cut the ties between Christianity and European colonialism, as “repudiation of missionary paternalism, combined with expanding indigenous initiatives, freed Christianity to become more at home in local situations” (Robert 2008, 124). In 2002, Phillip Jenkins published his well-known thesis on “the Next Christendom”; “Far from being an export of the capitalist West, a vestige of Euro-American imperialism, Christianity is now rooted in the Third World, and the religion’s future lies in the global South” (Jenkins 2007, xi). Demographic statistics demonstrate the surge of Christian belief from the northern to the southern hemisphere. In 1900, Europeans and North Americans made up 81 percent of the world’s Christians. However, during the last century, the epicenter of Christianity has moved from the north to the global South and from the west to the east (Barrett and Johnson 2001, 73). Today, 60 percent of all Christians are non-European and non-American, with massive expansion in Latin America, Africa,
and Asia (Johnson 2005, Remarks by Todd Johnson). Widely accepted estimates predict that by 2050, only one in five Christians will be non-Hispanic whites (Jenkins 2007, 3). Christianity’s annual growth rate is much lower than Islam’s at 1.38 percent, but the main drivers behind Christian population growth are considered to be conversions and high birth rates (Foreign Policy 2007, Christianity).

The rise of the Christian south and east means that the nature of Christianity is changing. In Latin American, Southeast Asia, and especially Africa, the success of Christianity has rested with natives’ ability to translate, contextualize and indigenize Christianity's central teachings, often stripping it of Western cultural trappings and flavoring the religion with local spirituality, language, and practices (Robert 2008, 130). Indeed, “Christianity as a truly world religion [is] increasingly defined by the values and idioms of non-Western cultures” (Sanneh qtd. Tienou 2006, 42). With the rise of entirely new denominations, as well as the fiery spread of Pentecostalism in Africa and some Latin American countries, the future character of Christianity remains uncertain (Robert 2008, 131; Jenkins 2007, 29). What is clear, though, is that southern Christianity is increasingly separated from a Western Christian agenda, and that the next Christendom is unlikely to reflect Western political and cultural leanings. This shift is in keeping with the transmodern hypothesis, as Christianity is held onto as a central truth, while a hugely diverse world community adapts that truth to their situation and culture.

**Da’wah and Dhimmis**

Historically, Islamic da’wah has been far less aggressive towards Christians than Christian missions to Muslims. Quranic support for da’wah comes from Surah 16:125: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best” (Quran, Surah 16:125). Muslims must reconcile this verse with another, “There is no compulsion in religion” (Quran, Surah 2:256). Many variations of Da’wah methods and intensity exist based on interpretations of these and other verses. However, da’wah as explored in this paper is “any effort by a Muslim to propagate, protect, or preserve a version of the Islamic faith, either to other Muslims or to non-Muslims.” This definition covers two clear approaches to da’wah: defensive-pacifism and offensive-activism. The first approach “characterizes the attitude of introversionist Muslims... concerned solely or primarily with retaining and
maintaining their own Islamicity, and not with the extension of that Islamicity through da’wa to the non-Muslim environment that surrounds them” (Poston 1991, 125-6). The second approach “applies to those who want to transform non-Muslim society, at both the individual and communal levels, to reflect Islamic values and beliefs” (126). In Islam, “an international da‘i, or Muslim missionary, is any individual who crosses a political border for the purpose of propagating or defending a version of the Islamic faith for two years or more” (Johnson and Scoggins 2005, 9).

For centuries, when Islam conquered a certain area, Christians and Jews were privileged as “peoples of the book” and were dhimmis, or protected minorities. Although conversion to Islam was not forced, Christians were second-class citizens with added taxes and restrictions; regardless, even up until the Ottoman Empire, Christians were largely free to practice their religion and Muslims did not focus on overt da’wah towards them (Sharkey 2004, 98).

A Growing Muslim Umma and the Islamic Revival

In 1900, Muslims made up 12.3 percent of the world population. In 2001, Muslims made up almost 20 percent of the world population, with a 2.13 percent growth rate (Barrett and Johnson 2001, 4). This high growth rate is due to the population explosion occurring in Middle Eastern and countries like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. A relatively small percentage is estimated to be caused by conversion to Islam, suggesting that da’wah plays a smaller role in non-Muslim conversion than Christian missions play in Christian conversion (Johnson 2005, Remarks by Todd Johnson; Barrett and Johnson 2001, 73). Islam is predicted to continue growing rapidly due to young and exploding populations in Muslim countries, although many of those countries are also expecting large Christian population booms (Jenkins 2007, 190).

For the past 20 to thirty years, “the Muslim world has been caught up in a massive religious revival” (Jenkins 2007, 198). The rise of Islamist extremism and political Islam are increasingly shaping relations with the Western and Christian world, and “today, Islam makes a point of being a complete system coextensive with society… with ambitions to become the global faith” (Martin 2004, 276). This Islamic resurgence has led to increased da’wah efforts, especially towards the West, where it identifies a
window of opportunity to spread the ummah, or Islamic world community. Western religious freedom and Muslim immigration to Western countries also led to increased da’wah to the West (Wagner 2003, 246). With the recent surge in Islamic extremism, a trend of conflict has developed between the faiths; “inter-religious violence in recent years tends to be initiated by Muslims against Christians” (Jenkins 2007, 199). 9/11, Islamic extremism, and recent violence towards Christians have led to simultaneously to increased Christian suspicion and curiosity towards Muslims and Islam. If the curveball affecting Christian missions to Muslims is the rise of Southern Christianity, then the Islamic resurgence is the factor shaping the effects of current and future da’wah efforts.

**Religious Convergence in Africa**

Huntington predicted a clash between “Western Christianity” and Islam, presupposing that there is no Christianity without the West and no West without Christianity. With every demographic sign and trend indicating that Westerners are a minority in the global Christian community and will continue to rapidly decrease in proportion to the rest of the world, the clash theory seems to lose ground. However, simply because the majority of the world’s Christians are non-Western does not guarantee better relations with Islam. Is Southern Christianity any more conducive to coexistence or peace with Islam than Western Christianity? Some academics see Islam and Christianity as inherently in conflict, using Africa as an example; the recent stint of civil wars have been fought roughly along the line where Islam and Christianity have expanded across the continent and now meet (Noll 2009, 31). In Africa in 1900, there were 11 million Muslims and 7 million Christians. In 2010, there are now 234 million Muslims (mainly in the North) and 470 million Christians (mainly in the south) (Lugo and Cooperman 2010, Preface).

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center of 25,000 Sub-Saharan Africans reported the following results: 1) “Many Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa describe members of the other faith as tolerant and honest.” 2) “In most countries, relatively few see evidence of widespread anti-Muslim or anti-Christian hostility.” 3) “Most acknowledge that they know relatively little about each other's faith... [although] Muslims are significantly more positive in their assessment of Christians than Christians are in their assessment of Muslims.” 4) An average of 26 percent of Christians and 32 percent
of Muslims felt that conflict between religious groups was a very big problem in their country (Lugo and Cooperman 2010, Executive Summary, Tolerance but Also Tension). The results hardly describe a population in which religious conflict is inevitable, instead suggesting a fairly religiously tolerant population.

The begetter of violence during the past few decades across African nations may have more to do with colonialism than pure religious difference, for “both Christianity and Islam have been expanding with great rapidity precisely in those areas of the world that have been most buffeted by the forces of colonization [and] decolonization” (Noll 2009, 30). Christianity was planted and aided in growth by Western colonization, on a continent that the Muslim world had long viewed as within its own sphere of influence (Jenkins 2007, 195). Again, the initial source of conflict does not seem to be Christianity and Islam but the results of conflict planted between Islam and Western Christian colonialism. Sub-African attitudes suggest that Christianity and Islam are not destined to clash, and that the continual strengthening of Southern Christianity will drastically alter future relations with Islam. In examining modern Christian missions towards Muslims and Muslim missions towards Christians, distinctions emerge between the effects of Western Christian missions and non-Western Christian missions towards Muslims.

**Christian Mission Trends toward Muslims**

Christian missions are carried out through three major avenues: missionaries, faith-based nongovernmental organizations, and mission or aid agencies supporting indigenous missionaries. Western Christian missionary and NGO activity causes more tension and conflict with Muslim communities and states than avenues utilizing southern missionaries, which seem more harmonious.

The means Christians employ towards Muslims and their ability to estimate the number of converts from Islam to Christianity revolve around restrictions in many Muslim countries against religious proselytism and conversion. Muslims in many Sharia-controlled countries are banned by law from converting from Islam to another religion. Afghanistan, Jordan, Kuwait, and Egypt have records of meting out jail time for religious converts. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, apostasy is a capital punishment
(Beehner 2007, sharia law). Therefore, sharia law remains a major obstacle to Christian missionaries and
NGOs seeking to work in Islamic nations.

Because of these restrictions and also because of the widely perceived historical difficulty and
failure of Christian missionaries to convert Muslims in the past few centuries, only thirteen percent of
Christian missionaries focus on proselytism towards Muslims. They are based across Africa, the Middle
East, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe in 53 countries in which Muslims make up at least 50 percent of
the population or in which there are at least 10 million Muslims. Of these countries, only five have
“complete state noninterference” in religious liberties. Beginning after the era of decolonization, most of
these countries stopped issuing visas to missionaries who are forthright about their intentions to
proselytize. Therefore, most Christian missionaries to Muslims are “anonymous” missionaries obtaining
visas to Muslim countries by focusing on professional or humanitarian work while also discretely
incorporating faith-sharing with Muslims (Johnson and Scoggins 2005, 8).

The problem with “anonymous” missionaries is that they often are perceived to be “covert”
missionaries, agents of the West sent to Muslim nations to undermine Islam as part of a wider Western
imperial religious, cultural and political agenda. The same view is held towards Christian NGOs working
in Muslim areas, who claim compliance with non-proselytism laws as they carry out humanitarian and
relief work. This perception partially stems from the historical Western-Christian colonial experience in
the Muslim world. However, recent Western missions to Muslims have tended to reinforce, rather than
change, this perception of religious-political ties.

Perhaps the greatest example of this ongoing perception has been in Iraq since the beginning of
the Second Gulf War in 2003. When Saddam Hussein’s regime fell and coalition forces led by the United
States and the United Kingdom entered the country and began occupation, thousands of foreign Christian
missionaries and NGOs entered the country; their officially stated intent was to aid in reconstruction and
humanitarian relief efforts in the country. However, shootings, kidnappings, and killings against Christian
missionaries and relief agencies began, “becom[ing] a source of tension in efforts to stabilize the
country.” The reason for these attacks were because insurgents and Iraqis were “suspicious that some aid
workers had other motives, both religious and political.” Iraqis had cause to suspect ulterior religious motives, for many Christian groups and agencies intended to or did clandestinely carry out evangelical outreach to Muslims (Cha 2004, 1-3). Oftentimes, foreign Christian missionaries, relief agencies, and NGOs in Islamic areas are guilty of “cover actions” combined with covert proselytism, although many truly limit themselves to aid and humanitarian work (Ghandour 2003, Proselytisation). This dishonesty and discrepancy between foreign Christians’ official intent and actual practice leads to greater mistrust between the religious communities.

Whether or not these Christian groups actually had ulterior political goals, it is clear that this was the impression Muslims received when foreign Christians took advantage of the Western military occupation of a 97 percent Muslim country to enter on a humanitarian and evangelical agenda. An article from a massively popular Arabic news network on recent Western and European Christian evangelism in Iraq made clear that impressions of ties between Western Christians and politics are widespread. The article stated that specific American churches working in the Kurdish region of Iraq strongly support George W. Bush, and links current Western Christian work in Iraq to the nineteenth century when Christians attempted to establish “values on the pillars of Western civilization.” Perhaps most importantly, the article stressed that the surge of Western missionaries was threatening the “peaceful coexistence between religious and nationalist Muslims, Christians and Kurds,” a coexistence that has “historical roots firmly based on respect for religions and the brotherhood and the common home” (Mari 2010).

Christian mission practices in Iraq are examples that represent larger major trends for Christian missions and Islam. First, popular opinion in Islamic areas, especially in the Middle East, views current European and American Christian mission activity towards Muslims as a continuation of historical Western attempts at political, religious, and cultural hegemony. Second, distrust between the religious communities is sowed because of national restrictions against proselytism and because of foreign Christians’ use of humanitarian or business work as a cover for covert proselytism towards Muslims. Third, the entry of foreign Christian missionaries into Muslim states threatens to upset the delicate relations and coexistence reached over time between majority Muslim and minority Christian populations.
The existence of Christian minorities within Islamic countries dispels myths about Islam and Christianity’s inherent incompatibility (Jenkins 2007, 29). Significant Christian minorities exist in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, with smaller minorities in most other Muslim countries (Christian Aid 2010, Middle East). However, indigenous Christian-Muslim coexistence is often threatened by surges of missionaries that tend to radicalize Islamic extremists who act against foreign missionaries and sometimes then turn on indigenous Christians. An academic study of 20 Arab anti-missionary treatises written by various authors from 1953 to the 1990s reported several reoccurring themes based on similar widespread beliefs regarding foreign Christian missions to Muslims: namely, a firm belief in “the assumption that Christian evangelism and Western imperialism have been inextricably linked in the modern era, and that the Christianity promoted by foreign missionaries was a Western cultural product,” and that “missionaries fomented sectarian tensions and kindled Muslim-Christian strife” (Sharkey 2004, 100-1).

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, Western Christians renewed efforts towards the Middle East as a part of a focus on the 10/40 window, “a group of countries lying between 10 and 40 degrees latitude” that contain the majority of the world’s unevangelized people, the majority of whom are Muslims. This focus was partially due to an increase in international Islamic da’wah efforts (Kidd 2009, 128). Especially since 9/11/2001, Western missionaries have faced increased expulsion, violence, and resistance in the Middle East and in other Muslim countries (Lee and Moon 2003, 259). This has contributed to a rise in aid agencies supporting indigenous missionaries and in southern missionaries to Muslim countries. The rise of Southern Christianity has led to a rapidly growing “two-thirds/four-fifths world” (non-western) missionary movement. From 1990 to 2000, the non-Western foreign missionary growth rate was 210 percent, while the Western growth rate was 12 percent (Jaffarian 2004, 132). Southern missionaries continue to make up an increasingly large percentage of total Christian missionaries, de-Westernizing the Christian mission field. Western missionaries to Muslims are dropping in number, with the Philippines now sending more Christian missionaries to Muslims than any other country. While little research exists on the impact of southern missions to Muslim countries, their increased activity “will likely begin to
challenge the perception that Christianity is a Western religion in opposition to Islam" (Johnson and Scoggins 2005, 8).

Recent years have given rise to 160 North American Christian aid and mission organizations that partner with and support indigenous missionaries and ministries (Lindner 2003, chapter one). Indigenous Christians are not considered “international” missionaries but rather focus on proselytism towards Muslims in their own country. Because they more fully understand the nuances of the cultural, political and religious contexts of their country, indigenous missionaries are coming to be viewed as imperative players in missions to Muslims (Kidd 2009, 142). Native missionaries to Muslim areas often plant and sustain underground or home churches and may receive training, money, or resources from foreign missions organizations, often having complete control over their ministry. Indigenous ministries in Muslim countries range from one-person prison ministry to networks that include hundreds of home churches and pastors (Christian Aid 2010; Partners International 2010). Indigenous Christian ministry to Muslims seem less likely to lead to tension or conflict than foreign missions to Muslims, because they are more likely to utilize more cultural, lingual, and Islamic knowledge, sensitivity, and contextualization than foreign missionaries, are not easily identifiable with Western religious or political entities, and also know the tacit and explicit restrictions on proselytism in their countries and how to work with or around them. However, more research on the effects of indigenous missions to Muslims is needed.

Contrary to Islamic perception, neither Western nor non-Western modern missions towards Muslims reveal an attempt at Western cultural or religious imperialism. Through Christian missionary literature, training, and practice, “increasingly, Muslim culture is seen as a bridge to Christianity and not an obstacle.” Christian mission methods toward Muslims are moving away from insistence on overt proselytism and adherence to Western Christian practices. Instead, countries like Indonesia, Turkey and Pakistan are experiencing “radical contextualization of the Christian Gospel among Muslims—such as new believers in Christ continuing to meet in mosques on Fridays” (Johnson and Scoggins 2005, 8; Johnson 2005, Remarks by Todd Johnson). Similarly, in Africa, an average of 27.5 percent of Christians and Muslims “incorporate elements of African traditional religions into their daily lives” (Lugo and
Cooperman 2010, Persistence). Such practices support the emerging transmodernist nature of Christianity, winning out over Western Christian exclusivism. Southern adherents increasingly contextualize central religious truth while retaining unique cultural and spiritual practices. Christian mission practices towards Muslims that allow for cultural contextualization will likely lead to less conflict between the religions rather than historical missionary practices that also pushed Western Christian practices.

Western Christian missionary activity often causes conflict both between missionaries and Muslims and can also increase tension between minority indigenous Christian populations with their Muslim majority populations. However, that tension is not caused by actual Western Christian imperial or paternalistic missional practices towards Muslims; it is more likely caused by ongoing Muslim perceptions of Christian missionaries or relief agencies as inherently Western and imperialist, on foreign Christian mission groups’ tendencies to mix humanitarian work with covert proselytism, and on Western Christians’ insensitivity to the timing of their missions ventures with Western political and military operations in Muslim countries. Using non-Western and indigenous missionaries and ministries towards Muslims, along with mission methods that allow for cultural and spiritual contextualization, seem far less likely to cause tension and conflict between the religious communities than the historical use of Western Christian missionaries insisting on adoption of Western Christian beliefs and religious practices.

**Muslim Mission Trends**

There are several types of Islamic da’wah groups that include non-Muslims in their outreach: groups sponsored by multiple governments, such as the Muslim World League; groups sponsored by single governments, including many funded by Saudi Arabia; voluntary independent groups such as Tablighi Jama’at (or “Missionary Society”); Sufi organizations; and voluntary groups targeting Muslims and non-Muslims in significant Muslim diaspora countries, such as the Islamic Society of North America. Methods of da’wah undertaken by these groups towards Muslims and non-Muslims include 1) internet outreach, television and radio programming, and da’wah training; 2) Quranic distribution, translation, and small group studies; 3) dissemination of literature and the publishing of periodicals; 4) establishing schools, funding other Muslim groups, and overseeing other Islamic organizations; and 5) miscellaneous
activities like relief work (including aid to the impoverished or disaster-stricken areas), mosque construction, and da’wah to correctional facilities.

About 85 percent of da’wah activity is aimed at other Muslims as a call to renew or strengthen their faith and path in Islam, with a small remaining percentage aimed towards Christians and other non-Muslims (Johnson and Scoggins 2005; 9-11). Since the 1920s, Muslim organizations in America and Europe have increasingly included da’wah towards non-Muslims in their repertoire, and such da’wah activity is expected to continue rising in the West (King 2010; Poston 1991, 134). Common da’wah methods in the West include inter-religious dialogue, publication and distribution of Islamic literature, lectures and study groups, prison ministry, and public educational campaigns (King 2010; Poston 1991, 130-134). Very little research exists on the effects of da’wah towards non-Muslims, but one empirical study was conducted by interviewing 72 Western converts to Islam; “Only one mentioned the influence of a Muslim missionary in their conversion and few mentioned formal religious leaders as a factor at all. Almost all were converted through witnessing the daily lives of Muslims they came in contact with” (Omar 2010). Also, no one cited “discussions with Muslims or the literature of the various Muslim organizations engaged in da’wah activity” as catalysts for their conversion (Posen 1991, 128). These results suggest that Islamic da’wah to non-Muslims is most effective when based on defensive-pacifism rather than offensive-activism; they could also mean that offensive-activist da’wah practices are still not as widely used as defensive-pacifist practices. Either way, modern Islamic da’wah methods towards non-Muslims, especially in the West have been far less aggressive than Christian proselytism towards Muslims.

An idea increasingly gaining influence among Muslim scholars in North America is Khurram Murad’s belief that Christians and Jews must be invited first back to their own faith before being invited to Islam; “The idea is presented that Judaism and Christianity, in their original forms, were precisely the same as the Muslim faith is today.” In practicing da’wah towards non-Muslims, Muslims should begin not by denouncing what is wrong with the non-Muslim, but by focusing on commonalities; “What is advocated is a change in approach that would place initial emphasis on the concepts and values rather
than the forms of Islam. These are human values that are universally agreed upon by Muslim and non-Muslim alike" (Poston 1991, 130). The Ahmadiyya movement, active in America since the 1920s, has begun to focus on da’wah practices that fit with Murad’s ideas; da’is are sent to Missionary Training College where they learn to contextualize the Ahmadiyya message. During the past few decades, “American Ahmadis have shown a tendency to adopt specifically American strategies of outreach, many of which have been borrowed from methods used by evangelical Christians” (Poston 1991, 134). There are certainly extremist and strictly conservative Islamic organizations that adhere to strict Islamic exclusivist truth claims and practices, demanding adherence to their interpretations of moral codes and cultural expectations. However, the focus of da’wah initiatives in recent years have been aimed at the West, with organizations focusing on da’wah towards non-Muslims neither aiming at nor demanding cultural or political change, often contextualizing da’wah practices and messages to better relate to non-Muslims.

Just as Muslim perceptions of Christian missions are rarely grounded in modern missional practices but rather on historical colonial experiences, Western Christian perceptions of da’wah organizations are not justified by actual da’wah practices but on biases based on current political and military conflict with Islamic nations and extremists. There is a tendency among European and American citizens and governments to associate da’wah-promoting Muslim organizations with Islamist extremist groups, accusing them of supporting terrorism (Pew Forum 2010, Changing Agenda?; King 2010). This can be explained partially by a tendency of Westerners to view Islam as a monolith and to therefore to view different Islamic organizations as equal, transferring suspicion and enmity towards extremist organizations to other Muslim organizations. Suspicion may also be caused by the prevalence of government-backed Islamic organizations that promote da’wah, causing Westerners or non-Muslims to suspect political motives whether or not they actually exist. Lastly, political and military conflict between Western and Middle Eastern nations and extremist groups will continue to shade Western Christian views towards Islamic organizations and reactions to da’wah efforts.
Aware of the obstacle such misperceptions create for da’wah, the main objective of da’wah towards non-Muslims is to provide education about and a correct portrayal of Islam. This goal is based on “a belief that once the faith of Islam is correctly portrayed, Christians and others will immediately recognize its truths” (Wagner 2003, 346-7). This will lead them to “gain their true understanding of Islam, leading to genuine sympathy for and then to acceptance of the values and concepts which Islam teaches” (Poston 1991, 130). There is certainly compelling evidence for the possibility of educational da’wah towards non-Muslims to lead to decreased tension and even peace between the religions. Educational resources, while not capable of aggressive conversion, dispel myths about Islam and reduce general public ignorance towards the unknown, both of which create fear and tension between Muslim and Christian communities. Lack of knowledge by Christians and Muslims about the other’s religion is a major cause of fear and tension between Christian and Islamic groups in sub-Saharan African countries. In a Pew poll of the attitudes of American non-Muslims towards Muslims and Islam, “those people who know a Muslim are less likely to see Islam as encouraging of violence; similarly, those who are most familiar with Islam and Muslims are most likely to express favorable views of Muslims and to see similarities between Islam and their own religion” (Pew Forum 2009, Muslims). Da’wah towards non-Muslims focusing on education about Islam is likely to lead to increased positive relations between Muslims and Christians, assuming that Christians take advantage of available educational resources and that the resources do not feature negative views towards non-Muslims or Christians.

Dialogue between Da’wah and Missions

While Islamic and Christian evangelism were once seen as obstacles to dialogue, Christians have largely accepted that dialogue with Muslims does not have to be aimed at or end in conversion to have immense value (World Council of Churches 2000, History of Dialogue). This was due in no small part to 9/11 and resulting conflict between the West and the Middle East, continually cast as a religious war. Christian and Islamic leaders also recognize that the movement and growth of Islam and Christianity, as well as both religions’ renewed proselytizing efforts towards the other, have the ability to lead to heightened religious conflict. As a result, Christian and Muslim scholars are increasingly engaging in
dialogue over missions and da’wah. Beginning in 1976 and several times since then, Islamic and Christian leaders have come together in sessions and conferences to discuss the ethics of missions and da’wah. Each time, “these important dialogues have resulted in agreement on broad ethical principles of mission, such as the freedom to bear witness in a non-coercive manner, [but] frank dialogue on the actual methods used by missionaries has been largely neglected,” leading to continual breaches by missionaries against the established broad ethical norms (Smith 2010).

Religious leaders and scholars are viewing religious propagation in terms a transmodern way, respecting the other religion and accepting its right to spread its beliefs. However, because of the diffuse nature of both missions and da’wah, proselytism methods sometimes still operate on exclusivist truth claims and ignoring the agreed-upon missional ethics code. A potential way to overcome this problem is by bringing Muslim and Christian missionaries, as well as “lay” Christians and Muslims, into dialogue rather than only the top religious leaders and scholars, so that the communities might learn about, understand, and respect the other’s right to share its beliefs and strive to reach mutually acceptable terms for propagation.

Conclusions

Religious conflict does not seem to be inherently between Islam and Christianity, but rather between Islam and Western Christianity. For the past several millennia, Muslims have seen Christians as inevitably American and European. Since Western Christianity carried colonialist social and political implications for the Islamic world in the past, Christianity continued to carry negative, imperialistic connotations for many Muslims. Up until the past few decades, only Western Christianity was actively engaged in the world. However, the face of Christianity is changing from one of the West to one of the global south and east, and Christians in those regions have increasingly less attachments to their Western founders and are increasingly involved in world religious mission and dialogue. With time, it seems likely that global Christianity will cease to carry the same negative Western connotations, and that Muslims will not regard this evolved Christianity with the same levels of suspicion and distrust. Likewise, the majority of Christians in the future will not have the same history and biases towards Islam as many Western
nations do, and may be more likely to welcome dialogue and coexistence. Indeed, as shown by the poll in Sub-Saharan Africa, continual Christian-Islamic conflict is not inevitable even in places of recent massive religious war, with the populations showing signs of religious tolerance and the opportunity for further education and coexistence obtainable.

Christian missions to Muslims have historically been based on Western Christian exclusivist practices, denigrating Islam and pressing Western Christianity and culture onto Muslims. Even as American and European missionaries increasingly proselytize using cultural and religious sensitivity and contextualization, most Muslims continue to connect Western missionaries with colonialism and imperialism. Western missionary work in most Muslim areas seems likely to increase tension and conflict between the religions for the foreseeable future, especially while Western military forces occupy Middle Eastern countries. However, if Christian Southern and indigenous Christians continue to play a growing role in missions to Muslims, utilizing mission practices aimed at deep tolerance and based on transmodernism, conflict against missionaries is likely to decrease.

Da’wah practices aimed at Christians have been historically accommodating and remain reasonably so in their new focus on Western Christians, supporting the transmodernization of Islamic missional practices. Although not for lack of trying, da’wah practices have not reached Christian communities as they perhaps can be expected to in the future. For now, da’wah towards non-Muslims is not leading to greater tension with Christians, although much more research is necessary the affects of da’wah towards Christians, especially in the Southern world. The Muslim missiological focus on making correct information about Islam prominently available to non-Muslims is likely to be a positive trend for Christian-Muslim relations, with high likelihood of easing tension and conflict and enhancing understanding and peace between the religions. Renewed Islam-Christian dialogue, especially regarding missions and da’wah, is another positive, rising trend in inter-religious relations. Ultimately, the degree to which each religion is capable of recognizing the right and the desire of the other to expand and to adhere to mutually agreeable, respectful proselytism methods will determine whether Christian missions and Islamic da’wah lead to a clash or coexistence.
Works Cited


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