American Ottomans: Protestant Missionaries in an Islamic Empire’s Service, 1820–1919*

This essay explores a complex, changing encounter between the Ottoman state and an influential community of American Congregationalist and Presbyterian missionaries who worked in Syria over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The missionaries’ own accounts present the history of their relationship with the world’s most powerful Islamic empire, where they lived and worked, as a saga of struggle and unmitigated hostility. In 1921, Charles Dana, a managerial missionary who took care of finances for the American Mission Press in Beirut, recapitulated decades of his colleagues’ anti-Ottoman rhetoric when he wrote that “The American Press has in its century of service been forced to fight its way up through countless discouraging reverses, through wars, massacres, pestilence, and famine, and the vicissitudes of the Turkish Empire. Its buildings and grounds have … been the only shelter for the thousands of refugees, fleeing from the fire and sword of the despotic Turk.”² His phrases echo a century

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²Throughout this article, I use the term “Syria” to refer to the region between the Tarsus Mountains, the Sinai Peninsula, the Mediterranean, and the Syrian desert, as many of my American, European, and Ottoman sources used it throughout the period I study. I use “Syrian” to refer to that region’s Arabic-speaking inhabitants.

³Charles Dana, “The American Press: One Hundred Years in Arab-Asia,” 1921, AA 7.1, folder 1, box 1, American University of Beirut Archives (AUBA).

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of American Protestant missionaries’ writings about their work under Ottoman rule.³

The archives of several American missionary organizations show that this official story of opposition hides a lost history of collaboration. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American missionaries in Syria came into compliance with Ottoman political structures and provided services which furthered the Empire’s goals. In turn, Ottoman officials provided American missionaries with both political protection and material support. For example, in 1914, just seven years before Dana wrote his screed, the missionaries’ most prominent and prestigious school, the Syrian Protestant College (SPC—it later became the American University of Beirut), hosted Senni Bey, a high-ranking local bureaucrat, and Ahmad Hassan Tabbara, the editor of al-Ittihad al-’Uthmani (The Ottoman Union), a reformist Beirut newspaper which supported the Empire’s ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) throughout the war.⁴ These voices of the regime spoke there to thank the school’s American faculty and Syrian students for dispatching a Red Cross detachment to care for the Ottoman Army as it battled against Britain in Sinai and Palestine.⁵ Soon after, al-Ittihad printed an article outpouring its “great thanks” to the Americans, who “had seized every opportunity to serve the nation.” Its author named them “the surgeons who bind up our country’s wounds during its redemption in blood.”⁶ When the American medical contingent reached Damascus, Cemal Pasha, a member of the military triumvirate which then ruled the Empire, gave them a warm reception.⁷ At a time when the army was grabbing all the grain it could find and hundreds of thousands of Syrians starved, the Syrian Protestant College’s food stores remained untouched, and Cemal Pasha permitted them to buy grain at military rates.⁸ At the Great War’s start, these American Protestant missionaries served an Islamic empire, which showered them with praise and material support. This embrace was not an expedient fling fueled by wartime passions, but the consummation of a half century-long

³ You can find plenty of these complaints in works like Isaac Bird, Bible Work in Bible Lands, or, Events in the History of the Syria Mission (Philadelphia, 1872); Henry Jessup, Fifty-Three Years in Syria, vol. 1, 2 vols. (New York, 1910).

⁴ As a reformist and proponent of local autonomy, Tabbara got himself in hot water with the local authorities only a few years before, in 1913, but during the war, he complied with official censors, supported the government, and toed the party line. Melanie S. Tanielian, The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East, (Stanford, 2017), chap. 3.

⁵ “Untitled,” Al-Kulliyah, November 1, 1914, AA 7.5, folder 1, box 2, AUBA.

⁶ “The American College and the Red Crescent: 21 Students Volunteer,” Al-Ittihad Al-’Uthmani, January 26, 1915, AA 7.5, folder 1, box 2, AUBA. The translation from Arabic is my own.

⁷ Edwin Ward, “Telegram to Howard Bliss,” January 5, 1915, AA 7.5, folder 1, box 2, Folder 1, AUBA.

⁸ See the February 15, 1917 entry of Edward Nickoley, “Edward Nickoley’s War Diary” 1917, AA 2.3.3, folder 2, Box 1, AUBA. For more information about the famine, see Tanielian, The Charity of War.
rapprochement which gradually entwined the Syria Mission and its most prominent spin-off institution, the Syrian Protestant College, with the Ottoman Empire’s institutions and political projects.\(^9\) The Missionaries’ evangelistic, cultural, and educational enterprises, which helped to change Syrian society in the nineteenth century and American policy in the twentieth, developed in ways which supported the Empire’s needs and imperatives, and flourished under its protection.\(^{10}\)

American missionaries in general, and the Syria Mission’s members in particular, play an important role in many recent histories of America’s early relationship with the world’s Muslims and the late Ottoman state’s responses to foreign actors. Both historiographies have incorporated missionaries’ self-narratives about their hostility to the Ottoman Empire’s government, society, and culture over the long nineteenth century’s course, and both have mostly missed or ignored the hidden history of collaboration which unfolded over the same period. Historians of Americans’ early encounters with Muslims have argued that American missionaries, like many of their countrymen, approached the Ottoman Empire’s religious, cultural, and political institutions with both civilizational exceptionalism and inflexible chauvinism, and that America’s later relationship with Muslims, and other peoples who lived in the places which future British and American policymakers would mark as parts of the Middle East, was built on the bedrock of this fundamental hostility.\(^{11}\) Selim Deringil, Barbara Reeves-Ellington, and other historians focusing on the consequences of American missionary work in the Ottoman Empire have argued that American missionaries in Anatolia and the Balkans were among the late Ottoman state’s most dangerous foes.

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9. SPC and the Syria Mission (affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions from 1818–1870, then with the Presbyterian Board of Missions after 1870) were technically independent organizations, but SPC’s Board of Managers included many of the Mission’s members; many SPC instructors went on to serve the Mission; its Faculty identified it as a missionary institution; the two organizations collaborated on many projects; and they were closely connected by social and marriage ties. Thus, I feel quite comfortable referring to both organizations’ members together, and I will do so throughout this article.


encouraging nationalist movements and drawing hostile international attention to the Empire’s treatment of minority populations.¹²

The missionaries’ official narrative, which pit a plucky American missionary David’s struggle against a cruel Ottoman Goliath, has been useful to historians of American orientalism and Islamophobia because of its resonance with pervasive nineteenth century American discourses that characterized Muslims as the ultimate religious and political Other and separated them from the landscape of Syria, which many Americans overlaid with the imagined sacred geography of the Biblical Holy Land.¹³¹⁴ The missionaries’ widely-read and influential accounts helped to crystalize forms of American orientalism and exceptionalism which went on to shape American foreign policy during the Cold War and its aftermath.¹⁵ The missionaries’ official narratives also provide a useful source for historians of their ideology and practices. They came to the Ottoman Empire with a fervor for Protestant evangelism that dimmed, but did not vanish, over the nineteenth century’s course, and a strong belief in the superiority of their own race and civilization.¹⁶ Even though Syrian teachers, preachers, and managers shared every part of their work in the field, the mission and its College would not offer Syrians (including those who held American citizenship and

¹². Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Domestic Frontiers: Gender, Reform, and American Interventions in the Ottoman Balkans and the Near East (Amherst, 2013); Selim Deringil, Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire (New York, 2012).


¹⁵. See Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York, 1978); Douglas Little, American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945 (Chapel Hill, 2000); Zachary Lockman, Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism (New York, 2010); Khalil, America’s Dream Palace.

¹⁶. For a particularly dramatic example, see the 400-plus page discussion of “heathen” societies’ social problems in James Shepard Dennis, Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Missions (New York, 1906). Dennis was a member of the Syria Mission.
American diplomas) equal status or pay until the 1920s.\footnote{This is immediately apparent in the Syria Mission’s budgets. With only a few exceptions, the Americans made more than five to ten times as much as the Syrian teachers and preachers they employed. For a representative budget, see “1891 Syria Mission Budget,” 1891, Archives, Item 338, Near East School of Theology Special Collections.} The missionaries were social engineers, fueled by overseas capital, seeking to reshape other societies in accordance with their own visions; agents of a “moral empire,” as Ian Tyrell described the Gilded Age and Progressive Era’s worldwide network of American missionary and philanthropic organizations; and proponents of the “Christian imperialism” that Emily Conroy-Krutz found at the American missionary enterprise’s Early Republic origins.\footnote{Ian Tyrrell, \textit{Reforming the World: The Creation of America’s Moral Empire} (Princeton, 2010); Emily Conroy-Krutz, \textit{Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic} (Ithaca, 2015).} Their official story helps us to understand both the ambition and ethnocentrism of their projects.

Unfortunately, many present-day historians have not just used the official narrative as source material, but uncritically reproduced aspects of it in their own work, accepting missionaries’ declarations of enmity as statements of fact. Consequently, our understanding of the origins of the United States’ relationship with the world’s Muslims remains distorted and incomplete. Like many self-congratulatory myths, Dana’s David-and-Goliath story skirted uncomfortable realities. Missionaries’ exceptionalism influenced, but did not determine, their relationships with the Muslims they encountered abroad. In Ottoman Syria, they faced the limits of the moral empire’s power. Over the nineteenth century’s course, they gradually reconciled their program of religious and cultural expansion with Ottoman rulers’ goals and concerns. They began to change their alignments and practices over a half-century before religious liberalism and ecumenism radically reshaped the stated purposes of the mainline Protestant missionary movement.\footnote{The interwar Progressive Era changes in missionary thinking and praxis that scholars like David Hollinger and Lian Xi have observed were genuine, but in greater Syria, and possibly also in fields like Qing China, they were part of a longer trajectory of accommodation rather than complete ruptures with the past. See Lian Xi, \textit{The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932} (State College, 1997); David A. Hollinger, \textit{After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History} (Princeton, 2013); David A. Hollinger, \textit{Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America} (Princeton, 2017).} They concealed these choices from a domestic audience of American donors and supporters who would have balked at the extent of their rapprochement with Ottoman rulers. But despite their declarations to the contrary, American missionaries in Syria were not the Ottoman Empire’s implacable enemies; indeed, over the late nineteenth century’s course, they became a compliant part of its repressive apparatus. This historical fact shows that the early modes of interaction that created the United States’ relationship with the Muslim world had roots in the social and political structures of the Ottoman Empire, and that the institutions of the nineteenth century
Anglo-American missionary “moral empire,” like their political counterparts, grew from the periphery as well as the metropole.  

Cooperation between the missionaries and the Empire became possible in part because the Empire’s institutions and projects changed throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, Sultan Mahmud II saw his Empire’s long-standing military-bureaucratic institutions fail as his Greek subjects revolted and Russia invaded his Balkan territories from the north. He purged the “Phanariot” Greek houses of Constantinople, which had long provided the Empire with its unofficial foreign service, and abolished the Janissary Corps, the longtime backbone of the Ottoman military. These decisions paved the way for the Tanzimat, a mid-century period of reform which saw the genesis of a new Ottoman army, navy, bureaucracy, and infrastructure. Paradoxically, in the short run, they also increased the Ottoman state’s dependence on both Muslim and non-Muslim religious elites who had traditionally supported imperial rule. Mahmud II thwarted the Janissaries with support from the ‘ulama, or Muslim religious scholars, of Istanbul. Christian leaders also played a part. The historian Christine Philliou offers a remarkable illustration: the “Auspicious Incident,” which dissolved the Janissary Corps also eliminated Istanbul’s firefighters, who came from among the Janissaries’ ranks. After abolishing the Corps, the Ottoman government asked the Armenian patriarch “to provide ten thousand Armenians from Anatolia to serve as the new firefighting force for the capital city. Two thousand Armenians reported for work within four days and became the new firemen of İstanbul.” Modernizing reforms required cooperation from older religious institutions.

20. Like “Middle East,” the term “Muslim world” refers to a constructed and contested category. I’ve chosen to use it here because of its breadth and polysemy. The Anglo-American Protestant Missionary community who I study used it to refer to areas of the world with predominantly Muslim populations, with a special, but far from exclusive, emphasis on the Ottoman Empire. Their Muslim Ottoman contemporaries shared this perspective with a more capacious twist; for them, the Muslim world could extend into Great Britain, where converts like Abdullah Quilliam still sought to spread the faith. In the twentieth century, the Muslim world’s geography contracted for American foreign policy makers (who broadly saw it as overlapping with the “Middle East”) and expanded for American Muslims, who came to see it as overlapping with their own country. See Samuel Marinus Zwemer, Elwood Morris Wherry, and James Levi Barton, The Mohammedan World of To-Day: Being Papers Read at the First Missionary Conference on Behalf of the Mohammedan World Held at Cairo April 4th-9th, 1906 (New York, 1906); Cemil Aydin, The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History (Cambridge, 2017); Matthew F. Jacobs, “The Perils and Promise of Islam: The United States and the Muslim Middle East in the Early Cold War,” Diplomatic History 30, no. 4 (2006): 705–39; Zareena Grewal, Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority (New York, 2014). For examples of similar developments in the British and American colonial empires, see Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton, 1996); Paul A. Kramer, The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines (Chapel Hill, 2006).

21. Christine M. Philliou, Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution (Berkeley, 2011), chap. 3.

22. Ibid., 78.

23. Ibid., 80.
Between 1830 and 1860, Ottoman rulers also faced an ongoing challenge from the rebellious governor of Egypt, Mehmet Ali Pasha, and consequently sought yet another source of support: the military strength of European powers like Britain, France, Austria, and Russia. The Sultan and his ministers turned to diplomacy to solve their domestic problems. Ottoman religious leaders and European diplomats held a variety of different perspectives on the projects of Protestant evangelism and education, and their interventions both helped and hindered missionary activities. By the late nineteenth century, the Empire’s rulers had consolidated their hold over many of their peripheral provinces. In Syria, central control returned after a multinational intervention ended a bloody civil war in 1860. The fractious upland region of Mount Lebanon passed from feudal lords to an Ottoman governor, and a new, strengthened provincial administration in Damascus united the rest of Syria. This shift put missionaries in close contact with representatives of a self-consciously modernizing Ottoman central bureaucracy, offering new possibilities for both conflict and collaboration.

AN INAUSPICIOUS START

In the mission’s long infancy, which overlapped with the reforming Ottoman state’s decades of crisis (1820–1850), American missionaries stood diametrically opposed to the Sublime Porte’s representatives in Syria. Pliny Fisk, Levi Parsons, and Jonas King; the first “American apostles” in the Eastern Mediterranean, were ever-hungry for more knowledge about the region, its languages, and its culture. However, they and their immediate successors stridently sought to spread their faith with drama and defiance. In those days, the missionaries’ encounters with Ottoman religious communities, as described in Isaac Bird’s *Bible Work in Bible Lands*, the early mission’s earliest published history, followed a pattern. The missionaries would arrive in a new city, study the local languages, preach among the people, distribute bibles, meet local notables, find sympathetic ears and, finally, confront the Empire’s long-established Christian clergy in impassioned debate. One such debate, between the

24. Ibid., chaps. 5–6.
26. “The Sublime Porte” was a common metonym for the office of the Grand Vizier in Istanbul, which many nineteenth century observers, including many of my own primary sources in English, French, and Arabic, used to refer to the Ottoman central bureaucracy.
American missionary Jonas King and the Maronite Catholic monks of Mount Lebanon’s old capital, Deir al-Qamr:

Here Mr. King entered into a detail of some of the abominable practices of the Church of Rome about the time of the Reformation, and on his remarking that the Church at that time had become very corrupt, both priests and people, Father Paul and all present exclaimed, “The Church corrupt! The Church corrupt! Impossible! Impossible!”

[King replied] “Not at all impossible. The Jewish Church was once the only Church of God, and did it not fall into error and wickedness?”

[Monks:] “But the Christian Church cannot wander, for Christ said, ‘Lo, I am with you always.’”

[King:] “Yes, with his Church to prevent it from destruction, but not from wandering, for St. Paul says that in the last time there shall come in errors — many shall depart from the faith, giving heed to doctrines of devils” (Father Paul interrupting, “Yes, yes, that is very true”), “forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving.”

This word among so many priests and monks was like fire to powder, and there was at once an explosion from the whole body of them. So great was the tumult that for some time it was impossible to speak.

It’s unlikely that these encounters were the explosive religious and rhetorical smackdowns which Bird paints for us, but they were real events which echoed in his confessional foes’ own hagiographies. Maronite Catholics told of how their most far-famed clergyman, Butrus “Pierre” Bustani, archbishop of Tyre and Sidon, stood firm against the missionaries’ challenges, naming him the “Thunder of the Protestants.” Jonas King and his comrades were expansionist Christians, full of zeal to convert the world in a single generation, anything but meek and mild.

Throughout this cycle of travel, study, communication and confrontation, the missionaries approached the Empire’s Muslim majority with caution. They would chat with scholars and give them Bibles, but they shied away from public challenges. The Empire sentenced an Armenian Muslim apostate to death in

29. The Maronites are a distinctive religious community who made up a plurality of Mount Lebanon’s population in the nineteenth century. They affiliated themselves with the Roman Catholic church during the Crusades, but maintain some distinctive rules and practices. See Heyberger, Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme catholique, chap. 1–2.
30. Bird, Bible Work in Bible Lands, or, Events in the History of the Syria Mission, 146.
31. This appears in French sources from the period, like Baptiste Poujoulat, La vérité sur la Syrie et l’expédition française (Paris, 1861), 75.
32. Many American missionaries in the early Republic articulated their goals this way. See Conroy-Krutz, Christian Imperialism; Makdisi, Artillery of Heaven, chap. 4.
Although the early missionaries burned with a fervor to evangelize the globe, in practice, they picked their battles. In the Levant, they focused their preaching on the region’s existing Christian sects (Eastern Orthodox, Melkite and Maronite Catholic, and Syriac) hoping that these “nominal Christians” could one day help them to convert Muslims. The missionaries sought not only to win adherents from those churches, but to make them into instruments of evangelism by recruiting their clergy, challenging the authority of their traditional ecclesiastical hierarchies, and transforming their beliefs and practices. These efforts to transform the “Eastern” churches, and the confrontational repertoire of denunciations, debates, and harangues that came with them, challenged Ottoman authority even though they left the Empire’s dominant faith untouched. For centuries, the Empire had embraced a pragmatic, ad-hoc mosaic of laws and arrangements granting its different religious minorities distinctive privileges and obligations. Under these systems, the Empire’s non-Muslim clergy had the responsibility and authority to tax and police their flocks. In doing so, they upheld both the Empire’s authority and their own.

The early decades of Ottoman reform, which eviscerated the Empire’s bureaucracy, made these clerics even more powerful and important. When the missionaries confronted Ottoman Syria’s Orthodox and Catholic clergymen, they were taking on a part of the Ottoman political system. In the early nineteenth century, American missionaries’ beliefs were, as Ussama Makdisi argues, an uncomfortable fit with the Ottoman Empire’s multi-religious society, and they were an even worse fit for its sectarian political order.

Throughout this early period, Ottoman officials at all levels, preoccupied with rebellions in Greece and Egypt, treated the missionaries with malign neglect. They did not actively persecute the missionaries, but usually looked the other way when Syria’s existing Christian clergy, seeking to counter the missionaries’ efforts, subjected Protestant converts to property destruction, threats, and violence. The Maronite Catholic Patriarch Yusuf Hobaish imprisoned one convert, Asa’ad Shidyaq and held him until his 1830 death, with the complicity of Emir Bashir Shihab, who the Sublime Porte had appointed ruler of Lebanon. In 1847, in the town of Hasbayya, the local Greek Orthodox community sued and assaulted the town’s Protestants and destroyed their homes, with the complicity of Habib Pasha, the Porte’s representative in Damascus.

33. Deringil, Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire, 74, 80.
34. Isaac Bird’s account of the Mission’s beginnings makes this goal clear. Bird, Bible Work in Bible Lands, or, Events in the History of the Syria Mission, 16–17.
35. Ussama Makdisi offers an elegant and immediately relevant portrayal of the system’s functioning in Ottoman Syria in Makdisi, Artillery of Heaven, chap. 2.
36. Ibid., 46.
37. Ibid., chap. 5.
In 1858 and 1859, Amin Bey al-Shuhail, the administrator of Qana, near Saida (Sidon), refused to intervene when local Catholics and Orthodox Christians carried out similar attacks on the Protestant community in Saida.  

MAKING PEACE WITH OTTOMAN INSTITUTIONS

These tensions began to ease first with an 1847 Imperial decree recognizing the Empire’s Protestants as a millet, or official religious community, and then the Great Reform Edict, or Hatt-i-Humayun, of 1856, which gave them the same rights as other communities. Neither of these edicts immediately ended local officials’ indifference to Syrian Protestants’ plight (the Hasbayya incident continued even after the 1847 decree, and the Qana incidents followed the Reform Edict), but they did allow the Protestants and their missionary allies to appeal to the central government. After 1860, no Syrian Protestant community experienced targeted communal violence. The Reform Edict was part of an overall Ottoman liberalization project that began with the Gülhane decree fifteen years earlier. Even more importantly, it was a useful tool for placating Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire’s most important ally in the Crimean War, which had only ended earlier that year. During the 1840s and 1850s, Britain’s representatives in the Ottoman Empire made several interventions on behalf of Protestant missionaries and their converts. They had three principal motives. One was a sense of cultural, religious, and racial kinship with the missionaries. The second, and probably the most important, was that affluent, devout mission supporters were an important British political constituency. These rich, titled, pious Englishmen and Englishwomen strenuously objected to what they perceived as mistreatment of Protestants by a British ally. When the Qana Catholic and Orthodox communities persecuted the town’s Protestants, W. W. Eddy, the American missionary on the scene, sent a letter to the British Evangelical Alliance. That body asked the British Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Malmesbury, to help. The Earl took their concerns seriously and asked the embassy in Constantinople to intervene. British officials’ third motive was a long-term plan to cultivate a Protestant minority in the region which would sympathize with Great Britain, much as Syria’s Catholic and Orthodox minorities already sympathized with France and Russia. In a series of letters regarding the Hasbayya incident, Consul Wood of Damascus proposed, and Foreign Secretary Viscount Palmerston endorsed, an intervention with precisely this


40. I haven’t come across any evidence of such violence in my extensive archival research, and Henry Jessup doesn’t mention any in Fifty-Three Years in Syria (even though his readers would have eaten it up like popcorn).

41. Deringil, Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire, 77–79.

42. Much of this exchange was published in a December 1858 issue of Evangelical Christendom, the press organ of the Evangelical Alliance. See AA 7.5.1, folder 11, box 1, AUBA.
goal in mind.\textsuperscript{43} Britain supported the Syria Mission, and thus, the Ottoman Empire came to accept Protestant converts into its existing structures.

The missionaries also adapted to their place in those structures. By 1856, it was already clear that they would not convert Syrians by shock and awe, and they came to focus more attention on the small flock who followed them than on their inveterate foes, the priests and monks. They had already begun to serve as their converts’ legal defenders and petitioners-in-chief. The imperial decrees recognizing the Protestant community legitimized this advocacy role.\textsuperscript{44} To use these declarations, the missionaries had to stop seeing and representing their converts as future ecclesiastical revolutionaries lurking within existing churches. The laws which they and their British supporters invoked gave Ottoman Protestants rights not as Maronites or Orthodox Christians nor as secular subjects, but as members of a new and distinctive religious-political community. The missionaries were never happy with this transition. Throughout the late nineteenth century, their annual reports bemoaned political sectarianism. In 1870, William Bird, a missionary at the Abeih station, wrote: “The power of the priesthood in the land is still most potent and every sect is a political party, indeed a sort of imperium in imperio. Everyone is expected to regard the civil and religious relations into which he was born as an inalienable inheritance. Party spirit and sectarian bigotry, intensified by family ties, unite to form chains of inconceivable power and tenacity.” Bird was concerned about the consequences of this sectarianism: “Spiritual religion and Christian morality have been superseded by a dead ritualism of and the ecclesiastics are the most hardened members of the community.”\textsuperscript{45}

However, these same reports show that the missionaries came to accept and participate in the sectarian political order which they denounced. We can trace this change through the missionaries’ descriptions of Syrians who kept their old religious affiliations even though they sympathized with Protestants’ ideas. In the 1830s, these were precisely the sort of Christians that the Mission wanted to make. By 1869, the missionaries’ perspective had changed. The report from the Abeih station that year, echoing similar language from other stations’ contemporary reports, identified the father of one Girgis, a “reformed” icon painter, as a man who they counted as a true, pious, saved convert even though he “does not call himself a Protestant” because of the potential social repercussions.\textsuperscript{46} This language recognized the Protestants as a distinct community overlapping with but not quite identical to the community of faith that the missionaries wanted to create.

The next decade saw yet another shift. Catholic and Orthodox Christians who accepted the Protestants’ beliefs but stuck to their old congregations came

\textsuperscript{43} Wood, “Letter to Viscount Palmerston.” FO 226/98, TNA.
\textsuperscript{44} William Eddy invoked these decrees in the Qana case I mentioned above.
\textsuperscript{46} “1869 Abeih Station Annual Report,” 1869, Record Group 115, box 1, Item 5, “Abeih Station 1844–1874,” Presbyterian Historical Society.
to frustrate the missionaries. Part of an 1880 report offers this lament: “The whole country has progressed in Knowledge both secular and religious to a remarkable degree ... By means of our schools and books, thousands have lost all faith in the rites and superstitions of their fossilized churches but this remains in most cases a mere intellectual perception. The conscience is not raised. There is no deep feeling for Salvation.” The report noted the strength of community traditions. “Men are swept away as by an irresistible current, and even enlightened college graduates for the sake of Feasts and custom will hypocritically kiss with the rest of the crowd the picture of the Virgin.”

The missionaries now sought converts who broke completely with their old community and its practices. Their old dream of overthrowing “Eastern” Christianity from within was dead. In 1887, they asked their home church to help them financially support the Protestant Vakilat, the official Ottoman state office looking after their sect. They had literally bought into the system.

Integration into the Empire’s sectarian system was not the only process which helped to draw the Mission into the Ottoman order. In the 1860s, two bloody civil wars sped the process along. The Syrian Civil War of 1860 started as a conflict between Mount Lebanon’s Maronite and Druze sects, which were aligned with France and Britain, respectively. After the Maronites attacked, the Druze quickly rallied, routed their foes, and carried out major reprisals, destroying Deir al-Qamr and slaughtering its people. The conflict broadened when Druze bands in the nearby Hawran region marched on Damascus’s Christian quarter, where, with the help of at least some Damascene Muslims, they put thousands to the sword. The Ottoman central government in Istanbul helped to negotiate a cease fire and dispatched an expedition to Beirut to restore order. At the same time, five-power intervention led by France—seeking to protect the Maronites and expand its Levantine sphere of influence—and Britain, which wanted to avoid political fallout from its allies killing Christians, organized a French expedition to Syria. Together, the European and Ottoman expeditionary forces changed Mount Lebanon’s system of government, executed Druze leaders, and forced Lebanon’s Jumblatt clan and Damascus’s Muslim community to pay reparations to their Christian neighbors.
This settlement humiliated the Sublime Porte. It expanded France’s sphere of influence in the Empire and gave Europeans veto power over the Ottoman government’s appointment of the officials who would now govern Mount Lebanon. At the same time, the conflict brought Syria under tighter central control. The conflict crushed and pacified Mount Lebanon’s fractious feudal nobles, and paved the way for a new, powerful political administration that ruled Syria from Damascus, with extensive support from the local clergy and commercial bourgeoisie. After the war, Ottoman officials’ declarations to American missionaries and British diplomats show that they were both more determined and more able than ever to clamp down on internal religious conflicts. The British government also saw its Druze allies defeated, its reputation ruined, and its political position weakened. Hence, it supported the Ottoman government’s efforts to keep the peace, even when doing so meant leaving missionaries in the cold. Some of the Syria missionaries’ colleagues learned about British officials’ new indifference from firsthand experience. In 1874, an American missionary in Damascus allowed “upwards of two hundred natives of the Greek Orthodox Church,” who were protesting their Patriarch’s use of the 1860 civil war indemnity to use a British property to meet, utter “violent aspersions” about the Patriarch, and publicly convert to Protestantism en masse. In time, this mass conversion could have provided the nucleus for a large, thriving Protestant community in Damascus, but in the short run, it might also have fostered violent conflict between the new Protestants and their former co-religionists. Essad Pasha, the Vali of Syria, who wanted to avert another wave of bloodshed in the city, imprisoned some of the dissidents. Britain’s man in Damascus, Vice-Consul Green, stood by his decision. Protestant missionaries in Syria could still grow their flocks, but if they wanted diplomatic support, they would need to do it quietly. Losing Britain’s unconditional backing forced the missionaries to work within Ottoman officials’ constraints.

The American Civil War, which followed on the heels of the conflict that ravaged Syria, also shaped the missionaries’ relationship with the Ottoman state. The war in the United States secured the missionaries’ access to the capital which they would later use to fund projects which linked their interests with the Sublime Porte’s. The Syria mission had important ideological affinities and personal ties with leading figures in the Union cause. Daniel Bliss, a fiery abolitionist, believed that the United States would meet “the doom of the oppressor,” like the Biblical Tyre and Sidon, if it continued to practice slavery. Henry Jessup, the mission’s main spokesperson for fifty-seven years, was the son of William Jessup, a Pennsylvania judge who led the nominating committee that chose to

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52. Weismann, Taste of Modernity, “Introduction.”
53. Vice-Consul Green, “Letter to Sir Henry Elliot,” October 18, 1874, FO 78/2339, TNA.
54. Daniel Bliss, “Letter to a Cousin,” July 26, 1856, AA 2.3.1, folder 7, box 9, Folder 7, AUBA.
run Abraham Lincoln for the presidency in 1860.\(^{55}\) His brother and fellow Syria missionary Samuel volunteered to fight in the Army of the Potomac as a chaplain, alongside future medical missionary and Syrian Protestant College professor George Post.\(^{56}\) These connections paid off as the Civil War consolidated and empowered a competitive coterie of pro-Union, Northeastern, and Christian merchants, bankers, and industrialists with global ambitions. The United States Christian Commission, a donor network whose organizers included the spectacularly wealthy Morris K. Jesup, emerged to help provide medical relief and other kinds of support for the Union cause.\(^{57}\) After the war ended, these Northeastern capitalists took advantage of their victory over the South’s planter gentry, their historic rivals, to secure more wealth and power.\(^{58}\) As the newly strengthened Union put resources into connecting the country with trans-continental railroads, and crushing the last vestiges of Native American power in the country’s West, Northeastern industrialists tapped North America’s vast timber and mineral resources. Their ranks included the Dodge family, a multimillionaire mercantile and resource-extraction dynasty whose scion David Stuart helped Daniel Bliss establish the Syrian Protestant College.\(^{59}\) Pursuing social prestige and utopian ambition, these powerful capitalists poured their funds into further philanthropic ventures overseas. The Syria missionaries drew on their ties to these Christian philanthropists to raise huge sums.\(^{60}\) William E. Dodge, Morris K. Jesup, and Jesup’s business partner John S. Kennedy all gave particularly generously.\(^{61}\)

\(^{55}\) Henry Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, 16.


\(^{58}\) Indeed, their participation in the war made them the United States’ new ruling class. Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York, 2003), 115.


\(^{60}\) Not every group of missionaries were as well-connected as the Syria clique. Heather Sharkey notes that the Presbyterian Mission in Egypt’s members mostly came from the rural Midwest and drew their support from small donors in that area. The Syria contingent were more Gilded Age than Gilead, and that difference had a significant impact on the course of both missions. Heather J Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton, 2008), 9–10.

\(^{61}\) William E Dodge was the College’s first key donor and fundraiser. See Bliss, *The Reminiscences of Daniel Bliss*, 168–69. Over the course of his lifetime, Morris K Jesup gave over $200,000 (an enormous sum at the time) to the College. See Daniel Bliss, “Letter to the Bliss Family,” February 19, 1908, AA 2.3.1, folder 7, box 9, AUBA. J. S. Kennedy gave on numerous
Their donations allowed the missionaries to acquire more land, hire more workers, and build grander institutions.

EDUCATION AND THE EMPIRE

This influx of capital, coupled with developments in Syria itself, fueled and facilitated the growth of an ongoing, ambitious educational program which made missionaries active participants in the Ottoman state’s political projects as well as quiescent subjects of its religious system. Three major imperatives, which grew from both the missionaries’ Protestant convictions and the specific cultural, political, and economic conditions of their mission field, drove them to open and expand schools. The first imperative was Biblical literacy. Almost all English-speaking Protestant missionaries worldwide agreed that to properly practice their faith, Christians needed to be able to read the Bible in their local language. Almost every Anglo-American Protestant mission field translated the Bible and taught people to read it. When a language had no written form, they would invent a new alphabet or transliteration system to capture it on the page. The Syria Mission shared this goal, with a twist. The missionaries’ language teachers, literate Syrians hired to tutor them full-time, taught them that Arabic should be properly written in the classical language of the Qur’an, a dialect related to but far from identical with Syria’s everyday vernacular. To read the Bible which the missionaries Eli Smith and Cornelius Van Dyck, the Syrian Protestant encyclopaedist Butrus Bustani, the Greek Orthodox poet Nassif al-Yaziji, and the Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Asir painstakingly crafted in classical Arabic, students needed to master not just literacy, but new phonemes, new vocabulary, and the classical grammatical arts of al-Sarf and al-Nahu, or morphology and case. The missionaries needed many skilled teachers to bring this Bible to Syria’s people.

occasions; the May 6–11, 1911 Special Meeting of the Syria Mission records a $25,000 bequest from his estate to found a hospital. See “Syria Mission Minutes 1904–1914.”

62. The Syria missionaries started operating higher schools in the 1840s. Their seminary in Abeih had already been operating for several years at the time of the “1850 Report of the Abeih Seminary,” 1850, Record Group 115, box 1, Item 6, “Abeih Station 1844–1874,” Presbyterian Historical Society. However, the scale of their educational work grew considerably after 1860, especially after the 1863 foundation of the Syrian Protestant College.

63. Dennis, Christian Missions and Social Progress, 172–74.

64. An 1892 pamphlet offering younger missionaries advice on learning the language urges new missionaries who ask whether they should focus on the “classic or the vulgar” to “learn both together.” It urges them to use the classical language in prayers and sermons, and suggests that they use Nassif al-Yaziji’s Rhetoric, a text in the classical language, to master the art of writing. Cornelius Van Dyck, “Suggestions to Beginners in the Study of Arabic,” 1892, Archives Item 679, Near East School of Theology Special Collections.

65. Missionary writings documenting the Bible’s translation explicitly declare that the Mission chose to emulate the Qur’an’s dialect, if not its style. Syria Mission, “Minute on Electroplating the Bible,” August 24, 1864, Record Group 115, box 2, Item 22 “Arabic Bible Translation,” Presbyterian Historical Society. Al-Sarf and al-Nabu were frequently noted as skills on missionary schools’ teacher training graduates in the 1870s and 1880s. See “Teacher
The second imperative impelling missionaries to open schools stemmed from the disjuncture between their original objectives and the Ottoman sectarian system. After seizing the machinery of the Eastern Orthodox, Maronite, and Syriac churches ceased to be a viable fantasy, the missionaries had no easy source of educated men and women to meet its Bible schools’ needs. The Maronite college at ‘Ayn Warqa turned out literate clergymen, Butrus Bustani among them, but most of those men would not teach for the Protestants. Not being able to co-opt the existing clergy also increased the mission’s other needs for literate and persuasive men and women. The Gospel could not spread without colporteurs, evangelists, preachers, and pastors. To satisfy this second major imperative, the missionaries would need high schools and a college.

Educational projects also served a third imperative: luring non-Protestants to hear the missionaries’ teachings and read their Bible. In nineteenth century Syria, education conferred social status. People who could read, write, and teach bore honorifics like Shaykh or mu'allim. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the expanding Ottoman bureaucracy, the growing state in Egypt, silk-spinning industrialization in Mount Lebanon, and increasing trade with Europe all increased the economic value of an education. This drive intensified as Christian Syrians started emigrating to the United States in large numbers in the 1890s. Even Syrians of other faiths wanted to study at the Americans’ schools. The missionaries saw an opportunity to spread their ideas with far less politically perilous conflict and confrontation. They viewed their schools as “wedges to cleave asunder the adamantine racks of bigotry” and divide “Eastern” Christian religious communities from their clerical leadership. The clergy, especially the landowning Maronite monks and bishops of Mount Lebanon, used threats, attempted boycotts, and lawsuits in their efforts to shutter Protestant schools. But as early as 1865, Catholic and Orthodox Syrians often defied their priests’ wishes. Education was an effective path to evangelization. Between 1876 and 1904, the Syrian Protestant community’s membership grew almost nine-fold, from 576 to 4,507.

67. All of these elements are beautifully illustrated by the autobiography of Abraham Rihbany, a stonemason’s son from Shweir in Mount Lebanon who studied with the missionaries, converted from Greek Orthodox Christianity to Presbyterianism, taught at their schools, migrated to the United States, where put his learning to use as a clerk, then as a newspaper editor, and eventually as a bestselling author. Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, A Far Journey (Boston, 1914). See also Akram Fouad Khater, Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920 (Berkeley, 2001).
68. “1869 Abeih Station Annual Report.”
All of these educational institutions needed money for facilities, teachers, and schoolbooks. Until the turn of the twentieth century, the missionaries could only recoup a small fraction of educational costs from students, because poorer families just couldn’t afford to pay high fees, and more affluent families could still send their children to free Catholic schools subsidized with “French gold.” The missionaries raised funds from the New York bourgeoisie to support their educational enterprises. With their donors’ largesse, they were able to erect a magnificent campus for the Syrian Protestant College, as well as four boarding schools, and hundreds of day schools. Education was a niche they could comfortably occupy in the Ottoman Empire and a necessary project for creating and sustaining an independent religious community. Now, they had the resources to pursue it on a grand scale.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, this educational project aligned American missionaries and their institutions with the Ottoman Empire’s political needs. Although many histories have presented the late Empire as “the sick man of Europe,” spending its last century just waiting to be carved up by Europeans, the Empire’s late nineteenth century incarnation fought toe-to-toe with European armies and sought recognition in the community of “civilized” nations. Within the Empire itself, Sultan Abdülmelik II, who came to the throne in 1876, bolstered his legitimacy by simultaneously presenting himself as an Islamist and a modernizer, promoting both Sufi brotherhoods and science. War and science both required educated workers. A strong army needed good medical care and sanitation, both on the march and in the provinces, where a large, healthy population could furnish recruits and tax payments. Its funding depended on a modern bureaucratic state and a flourishing economy, which, in turn, required a bevy of literate clerks. Scientists and science teachers also usually needed special training to master a rapidly-expanding body of European knowledge. Education had become imperative for the Sublime Porte’s strength and survival.

In many cases, a shared interest in education was not enough to forge a cooperative relationship between Ottoman rulers and foreign missionaries. Selim Deringil argues that although Abdülmelik II and his ministers recognized the Empire’s need for education, he viewed missionaries who supplied it as malign foreign influences which the Empire needed to counter and repress. Deringil provides solid evidence that this was, to at least some extent, a true picture of the Sultan’s view of French Catholic missionaries in Syria, British missionaries

in Palestine, and American missionaries in Armenia and Ottoman Europe, who had active relationships with separatist movements and fractious local notables.\textsuperscript{75} Both before and during Abdülhamid’s reign, Ottoman officials in both Syria and Constantinople, and those officials showed them a different face. Rather than enmity, they offered the Americans praise, hospitality, and assistance. In 1866, \textit{Hadigat al-Akhbar} (Garden of News), which the missionary Henry Jessup described as a government-sponsored newspaper, congratulated students at the Beirut Female Seminary (an American missionary school for female teachers) on their fine showing at their final examination.\textsuperscript{76} In 1871, the Ottoman Foreign minister offered to help pay travel costs for SPC medical students who wanted to seek the Imperial Medical Diploma in Constantinople.\textsuperscript{77} Rüstem Pasha, the \textit{mutasarrif} or governor of the Mount Lebanon province from 1873–1883 was a close personal friend of the Syrian Protestant College’s president, Daniel Bliss, and sent his son to study there.\textsuperscript{78} From 1887 onward, the missionaries regularly called on the \textit{mutasarrif} of Mount Lebanon at their annual meetings, and at the turn of the twentieth century they began visiting the Vali, or governor of the Beirut Vilayet, or province.\textsuperscript{79} In 1890, Abdülhamid himself awarded Cornelius Van Dyck a medal for his valuable service to the empire: translating scientific books into Arabic.\textsuperscript{80} This is not the treatment that one would accord to a hated foe.

Of course, the Syria missionaries were still foreigners, promoters of an alien faith, and, at home, often hostile critics of the Ottoman regime. So why did the Sublime Porte and its deputies in Syria treat them as its friends and collaborators? I would argue that they did so because the American missionary educators in Syria responded to their own particular political circumstances and strategically chose to cooperate with the regime rather than opposing its interests. They worked in a region where the Ottoman state was consolidating its strength, unlike their colleagues in the Balkans and Eastern Anatolia, where it was crumbling under the onslaught of successive wars with Russia, retreating from territories it had held for centuries, and managing an influx of millions of refugees.\textsuperscript{81} Unlike their French and British counterparts in Syria, they lacked the immediate protections that came with great power citizenship. So, instead

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{75} Deringil, \textit{The Well-Protected Domains}, 119–32.
\bibitem{76} Henry Harris Jessup, \textit{The Women of the Arabs} (New York, 1873), 101.
\bibitem{77} Mehmet Emin Ali Pasha, “Letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Sublime Porte,” March 15, 1871, AA 3.9.2, folder 1, box 1, AUBA.
\bibitem{78} The friendship is mentioned in Bliss, \textit{The Reminiscences of Daniel Bliss}, 233. The son’s attendance is mentioned in William Booth, “Letter to Daniel Bliss,” November 27, 1876, AA 2.3.1, folder 5, box 10, Folder 5, AUBA.
\bibitem{81} Reşat Kasaba, \textit{A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees} (Seattle, 2011), chap. 5.
\end{thebibliography}
of working with local nationalists against Ottoman officials, they deferred to the Empire’s authority.

American missionary educators in Syria were not just useful to the regime, but deferent to its authority. Seeking the local legitimacy and prestige that an Imperial imprimatur could confer, they sought to subordinate their College to the Empire’s official Imperial Medical School. In 1870, a year before the College’s first class completed its studies, one of its professors, Cornelius Van Dyck, wrote to the Vali of Syria, requesting “the appointment of a Medical officer of the Government ... at the annual examinations of the Medical Department of the Syrian Protestant College for the purpose of attesting his satisfaction with the acquirements of those on whom the College shall confer its diploma by adding his signature to that of the Faculty of Medicine.” The Vali, eager to broaden his province’s potential pool of modern military medical men, endorsed Van Dyck’s request and sought the Sublime Porte’s approval. In a letter explaining the exchange to the U.S. Consul-General in Beirut, Van Dyck expressed his, and his colleagues’, hopes “to have the Institution established on a truly national basis, with government approbation and aid,” and obtain a firman, or Imperial decree, granting the College’s graduates an official medical license. Although the American missionaries frequently blamed the Porte’s policies for their projects’ shortcomings, they were, in practice, eager to make their College part of the Ottoman state-building project.

The central bureaucracy offered an official relationship on more cautious terms. On March 15, 1871, Mehmet Emin Âli Pasha, the Ottoman Foreign Minister, wrote that the Imperial Medical Faculty had received, but rejected the College’s petition. However, he also stated that “To prove its desire to spread the benefits of science in all parts of the Empire,” the Imperial government would cover the travel and living expenses of “indigent” students traveling to Constantinople to take the Imperial Medical Examination. This decision allowed the Sublime Porte to tap a new source of well-trained recruits, and show-off its modernizing munificence towards a peripheral province without surrendering its authority to choose who could impose quarantines and investigate crimes to a foreign missionary organization. This deal also helped the College, which it marked as part of a recognizable path to profit and power.

This concession did not satisfy the College’s faculty, who continued striving to make their medical school an officially Ottoman institution. In 1873, they sent another plea to the Porte, hoping that “the Imperial Faculty will enter into correspondence with us as a legitimate succursale [branch], and will exchange with us specimens illustrative of Natural Science and Antiquities, as well as the

82. We know about this exchange because Van Dyck forwarded a copy of the Vali’s letter to the US Consul in Beirut. Cornelius Van Dyck, “Letter to LM Johnson,” December 12, 1870, AA 2.3.1, folder 1, box 9, AUBA.
83. Ibid.
publications which may be issued by the two faculties. It will also give us great pleasure to receive a visit from a delegate of the said Faculty." They sought recognition from both the state itself and the scientific community that it cultivated in Constantinople, even if it meant subordinating the College’s medical curriculum to an Ottoman institution’s. Their pleas were not in vain. In 1878, Rashid Pasha, another Minister of Foreign Affairs, informed them that the Empire, seeking to improve relations with a friendly power and spread science throughout its provinces, would make the College a “medical school of the second rank” whose graduates could come to Constantinople and take the Imperial Medical Exam as soon as they received their diplomas, without administrative hurdles or delays. The College had not won the right to license official physicians on its own, but it and its students could bask in the glory and prestige of the Sublime State.

The missionaries also scrupulously obeyed the Empire’s educational laws. Their surviving school-books, printed at Beirut’s American Mission Press, carry the imprimatur of the Ministry of Instruction, showing that they had passed official review and censorship. Their monthly newspaper supplement for both Sunday school and day school students, the Saj al-Munir (Shining Star) depicted the Ottoman Crown Prince, or Vali Abad, Mehmet Salim, in the same noble, confident pose it used for etchings of beloved American statesmen. The Syrian Protestant College’s rules on student societies, following Ottoman educational law, banned political organizations and debates, and put all student meetings under the watchful eye of faculty chaperones, so that surveillance might discourage forbidden discussions. During the First World War, the College’s president, Howard Bliss, provided Cemal Pasha, the Ottoman military governor of Syria, with a list of the school’s Armenian students, even though he was aware of the ongoing Armenian genocide. As much as they complained about the Empire to audiences at home, the Syria missionaries deferred to Ottoman institutions and upheld their adopted country’s educational policies and regulations, even when doing so challenged their deeply-held prejudices or their proudly proclaimed values.

Ottoman officials cordially received missionaries’ deference because their contribution was a valuable one. At its foundation, their College was the only

85. They communicated this message through U.S. diplomatic representatives in Beirut and Constantinople. See Syrian Protestant College Medical Department, “Letter to J Baldwin Hay,” October 24, 1873, AA 3.9.2, folder 1, box 1, AUBA.
86. Rashid Pasha, “Message from Rashid Pasha,” July 3, 1877, AA 3.9.2, folder 1, box 1, Folder 1, AUBA.
87. For example, see a missionary grammar textbook like Nassif al-Yaziji, Fasl Al-Khitab (Beirut, 1887).
88. Al-Saj Al-Munir, July 1, 1888, Archives Item 462, Near East School of Theology Special Collections.
89. “Recommendations for Student Societies,” Circa 1900, AA 4.3.3, folder 6, box 1, AUBA.
90. Howard Bliss, “Telegram to Cemal Pasha,” September 12, 1916, AA 2.3.2, box 18, Item 4, AUBA.
medical school in Greater Syria, and in the following half-century, it only acquired two rivals: the French-sponsored Jesuit Université de Saint-Joseph in Beirut, and the Imperial Medical School in Damascus. Many of its graduates, medical men with relatively rare skills, played important roles in local administrations. In 1888, Daniel Bliss sent out a circular to find out what some of these graduates had been up to since leaving the school. Many of his former students wrote about their service in Ottoman Syria’s government. They had served as municipal doctors, sanitary inspectors, quarantine enforcers, hospital administrators, and forensic investigators, in Beirut, Sur (Tyre), Homs, the Metn, Damascus, Ba’albek, Zahla, Saida, Suq al-Gharb, Haifa, Tarabulus, Hasbayya, and other Syrian towns. They helped to uphold the public order by producing official scientific truths in court, taking care of the sick and wounded, dispensing medication, and protecting the population against epidemics.91 By training them, SPC, and the missionary schools that many of them had attended as children, had performed a remarkable service for the state.92

Although education helped to create solidarity between American missionaries and Ottoman officials, it also provided opportunities for conflict and harsh words. These conflicts show the unease, anxiety, and mutual suspicion that this partnership brought for both parties, but their resolution shows how extensively the missionaries had become integrated into the empire’s rules, systems, and projects. These tiffs erupted periodically between 1870 and the start of the First World War. They centered on matters like school regulations, building permits, property taxes, and whether or not it was reasonable for SPC’s medical graduates to make the trip to Constantinople to get their licenses. The missionaries resolved their disputes with Ottoman officials with careful correspondence, carried out through the U.S. consul or a local official, or by personally traveling to Constantinople to lobby the Porte directly. These conflicts typically ended with the missionaries complying with a regulation or demand and the Empire issuing a firman or some other sort of official recognition. They usually focused on minor details rather than fundamental values; threatened the missionaries with expense or annoyance, not violence; and resolved themselves within the framework of the Ottoman Empire’s laws and its treaties with the United States.93 The conduct of these conflicts shows that the Ottoman state accepted

91. This collection of letters, all in Arabic, all sent in December 1888 and January 1889, has been an amazing source for tracking SPC’s impact on the region even in its earliest decades. See AA 2.3.1, folder, box 3, AUBA.

92. The focus of my characterization of the Syrian Protestant College’s educational programs differs somewhat from other scholars’. In her account of the school’s influence, Betty Anderson emphasized the College’s American qualities, and its distinctive role as a center for Western-style liberal education in the Arab world. Marwa Elshakry has focused more on the connections and contradictions between the College’s program of scientific education and its missionary ideology. See Anderson, The American University of Beirut; Elshakry, Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950, chap. 1.

93. For an example of this sort of conflict, observe the missionaries’ efforts to certify and obtain tax exemptions for school properties in Syria Mission, “American Consul
the missionaries’ presence and often indulged their requests, and in turn, they accepted its authority.

The resolution of a more dramatic conflict between the missionaries and the Ottoman state’s local voices in the aftermath of the “Young Turk” Revolution of 1908, which brought new guarantees of religious freedom for all Ottoman subjects, illustrates the missionaries’ integration into the Empire’s systems. In 1909, SPC still required students of all faiths to attend Bible classes and Protestant services. That year, two of SPC’s Muslim students, ‘Abd al-Jabbar and ‘Abd al-Sattar Kheiri, brothers from India, argued that this requirement was incompatible with the new Ottoman constitution. When the administration refused to honor their requests for an exemption, turned down a second request to found a Muslim students’ club, and punted a third request, for an ostensibly nonsectarian Islamic literary society, to a committee, the Kheiri brothers started a student strike to end the mandate to attend services. They quickly enlisted almost all the College’s Muslim students. They also won the support of the local Muslim community by talking to local religious leaders, publicly petitioning the Sultan to help them in his capacity as the Caliph of all Sunni Muslims, and wielding the pen against the school’s policies in *Al-Ittihad al-‘Uthmani*.94 Their demands were respectful but firm, addressing the faculty as benevolent, respected fathers who needed to be more open to their students’ needs and the Empire’s new political realities. Edhem Bey, the Vali of Beirut, endorsed their struggle.95

Edhem Bey’s decision to support the Muslim students aligned with many imperatives of Ottoman politics. Beirut’s Muslim community and local CUP members, relatively loyal Ottoman subjects, favored them.96 The students demanded relief from foreigners’ impositions, so supporting them offered officials an opportunity to uphold Ottoman prestige and independence. And, although the 1908 revolution had a secular cast, the new CUP-led Ottoman government continued to follow Abdülhamid II’s policy of cultivating relationships with Muslim communities around the world, using the Sultan’s status as...

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94. Franklin Moore, “Address to the Syrian Protestant College Faculty,” January 25, 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 6, box 6, AUBA. Moore, an SPC Faculty member, offered a remarkably complete and sympathetic account of the Muslim students’ strike. His description is corroborated by local newspaper articles; see “Translated Al-Ittihad Al-‘Uthmani Articles about 1909 SPC Student Strike,” 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 15, box 1, AUBA; “Original Language Al-Ittihad Al-‘Uthmani Articles about 1909 SPC Student Strike,” 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 16, box 1, AUBA.

95. Edward Nickoley, “Letter to Howard Bliss,” January 20, 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 9, box 1, AUBA.

96. Contrary to later nationalist narratives, plenty of the Ottoman Empire’s Arabic-speaking subjects supported the CUP, and it would have behooved local officials to take their concerns seriously. See Hasan Kayali, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley, 1997).
Caliph to bolster the empire’s influence.97 The Kheiris were prominent members of British India’s enormous Muslim community. Their father was a “Maulvi” or religious scholar who received the title “Khan Bahadur” for his valuable service to the British Empire. After leaving SPC, they went on to found a Dar al-Ulum, an Islamic school on the model of Syed Ahmed Khan’s Aligarh College, in Beirut, with the support of the Ottoman government and the Indian Muslim jurist Syed Ameer Ali.98 During the First World War, the Ottomans and Germans enlisted their help to spread anti-British pan-Islamist revolutionary propaganda among India’s Muslims.99 They were exactly the sort of elite Muslims that the Empire wished to cultivate internationally. All of these factors gave the Ottoman authorities a strong political motive to make the College comply with the strikers’ demands.

The College’s faculty understood this possibility, seriously considered accepting students’ demands, and even temporarily excused the strikers from services in exchange for a declaration of loyalty.100 They found themselves in a tighter position when SPC’s New York-based Board of Trustees, which held the college’s purse strings, insisted that the school keep “its Christian character” and refused to countenance a change.101 Fortunately, the Ottoman government offered them an out. Edhem Bey, after meeting with GE Ravndal, Beirut’s U.S. Consul, agreed to refer the matter to Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha, then the Empire’s Interior Minister. On January 27, the Minister sent an order asking the College to end its practice of compulsion.102 However, over the summer, after the students went home and the furor in the press died down, the government quietly dropped the matter, and accepted the College’s solution of asking entering students to sign a contract pre-committing them to religious attendance.103 The Empire’s rulers would not endure a highly visible humiliation at the missionaries’ hands, but they also clearly saw value in continuing to let the College operate on its own terms, if the alternative was its closure. Although it was a

97. Kemal H. Karpat, The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State (New York, 2001), 370. For information about the development of the Hamidian policies the CUP continued, see chaps. 7, 8, 12, 13.
100. The possibility is discussed in a letter to the College’s major donors and trustees in the US. Howard Bliss, “The Recent Difficulty in Connection with Religious Instruction and Worship in the Syrian Protestant College, Beirut, Syria,” April 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 6, box 1, AUBA.
101. Howard Bliss, “Circular for SPC Alumni,” April 10, 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 6, box 1, AUBA.
102. GE Ravndal, “Letters to Howard Bliss,” January 21, 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 10, box 1, AUBA.
103. Howard Bliss, “Letter to Incoming Students’ Parents,” Summer 1909, AA 4.3.2, folder 10, box 1, AUBA.
potential political millstone, it had material value, and it kept the Empire’s protection.

The Ottoman government’s willingness to let the missionaries continue their practices even in the face of revolutionary imperatives and political backlash paid off. During the First World War, members of the Syria Mission and the SPC faculty went to the Sinai front to apply their medical and logistical expertise and care for the Ottoman army’s wounded soldiers. The College also did its part to produce medical men to serve the military machine. In 1919, Edward Nickoley, who had temporarily stepped in to replace the recently deceased Howard Bliss as SPC’s president, sent out a circular letter to find out where the war had flung the College’s surviving alumni. Those who still lived in the Ottoman Empire had almost invariably served in the Ottoman military, usually in medical positions. One strove to control typhus epidemics in Bitlis on the Caucasus front before being falling into Russian captivity and caring for his fellow prisoners of war. Another tersely mentioned the two medals he had won for his courageous service to the now-vanished regime. Others had gone to fight in Mesopotamia or Egypt; some, of Armenian descent, continued to care for the sick and the wounded even as their families at home were slaughtered.104 In the war’s aftermath, members of the missionary community produced auto-hagiographies about their wartime efforts to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and house the homeless. Their students’ Ottoman medical military service is conspicuously absent from these accounts.105 Despite this silence, the Syria Mission and the SPC’s efforts continued to help the Ottoman Empire until its final defeat and partition.

By the late nineteenth century, American missionaries in Syria were not the Ottoman Empire’s enemies, but its useful, deferent, and accepted subjects. This reality surprises us because it clashes so dramatically with the both Ottoman officials’ and American missionaries’ self-narratives. As historians of the United States’ relationship with the Islamic world, we need to reconcile ourselves to our actors’ inconsistencies and compromises and find ways to explain a world where an anti-Islamic polemicist like Henry Jessup and his colleagues politely called on the Muslim Vali of Beirut for tea, and the arch-conservative Islamic chauvinist Abdülhamid II gave one of the United States’ most noteworthy Protestant missionaries a medal.106 I argue that ongoing changes in the Ottoman Empire’s political structure and the U.S. economy made cooperation between American missionaries and Ottoman officials both possible and

104. “Responses to Circular Regarding SPC Students’ War Experiences,” 1919, AA 1.6.1, folder 6, box 2, AUBA. This is a collection of letters from SPC students, mostly in English, describing their war experiences.

105. See, for example, Margaret McGilvary, The Dawn of a New Era in Syria (New York, 1920).

106. For more on Jessup’s polemics, see Kidd, American Christians and Islam, 48–50.
desirable for both parties, even though they also sometimes made public awareness of that cooperation embarrassing and dangerous. Despite their strong beliefs, these actors weren’t inflexible representatives of unchanging cultures or combatants in a clash of civilizations. They were men and women of their particular historical moment, reshaping their ideologies and practices to its conditions, inevitably creating slippages between the stories they told their backers (and themselves) and their actual choices.