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Review of Makdisi's Artillery of Heaven

American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East

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Ussama Makdisi. *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xi, 262. \$35.00.

At a time when one of the reactions to the events of 11 September 2001 was the statement of the commentator Ann Coulter, in the *National Review Online* of 13 September 2001, that 'we should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity', and the activities of some missionary groups such as Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse are one of the factors which have contributed to the resentment of and opposition to the US presence in Iraq since 2003, a book investigating the history of American missionary work in the Middle East is timely. This book concentrates very much on Lebanon, rather than the Middle East as a whole, and there is a particular focus on the biography of one individual, As'ad Shidyak (1798-1830), but it succeeds admirably in locating American missions to Greater Syria (i.e. including what is now Palestine-Israel as well as Syria and Lebanon) in the wider context of both American Christianity and 19th-century Ottoman Syria.

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It does so in seven chapters, grouped together in three parts. After an introduction which outlines the main themes and approaches of the book, Part I, Prelude, looks at the self-understanding of American Christianity as seen through the eyes of the Puritan divine Cotton Mather at the start of the eighteenth century, with particular reference to the historical significance of John Eliot and his mission to the American Indians, and the self-understanding of Maronite Christianity in the Lebanon within the wider boundaries of the multi-religious Ottoman Empire through the eyes of Istifan Duwayhi, the patriarch of that church between 1670 and 1704. The self-description of the Maronite church (which had submitted to papal authority in 1180) as a bastion of Christian orthodoxy within a Muslim environment was a crucial element of this.

Part II, Intersections, then tells the main narrative of the book, the establishment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810, significantly influenced by the example of the mid-18th-century missionary to the Indians, David Brainerd, its attempts to spread its message, initially through Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons, in Mount Lebanon, and one of the results of these efforts, the conversion to Protestant Christianity of the graduate of the Maronite seminary at 'Ain Waraqa, As'ad Shidyak, in 1825. What was perceived by the missionaries as a great victory, however, was not seen that way by everyone, particularly the Maronite authorities, and five years later Shidyak was dead, detained, persecuted, tortured, and subjected to rituals of exorcism on the basis of claimed insanity.

Part III, Reorientations, then looks at the legacy and later interpretation of these events, firstly within the American Board, where Shidyak was for a time presented as a martyr, but where later generations of missionaries shifted

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significantly towards a more 'civilizing' style of mission, as seen in the foundation of the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University of Beirut, in 1866. 'The missionaries of Syria became far more assertively American' (p. 175); and secondly within Lebanese society generally, where through the work of another Maronite convert to Protestantism, Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883), Shidyak was presented, through a biography of him in Arabic, as a pioneer of ecumenism and pluralism. Conversion to Protestantism, in other words, was in effect as close as was possible in the Ottoman and Maronite context to conversion to secularism. The Epilogue then seeks to draw out and crystallise some of the implications of this history for the contemporary situation, such as 'the fundamental overturning of the seductive language of American or Islamic exceptionalism' (p. 215), and the realisation that, in the final sentence of the book, 'we are, in the end, all implicated in one another's histories' (p. 220).

In its wealth of detail, including its analysis of the journal kept by Shidyak in the final years of his life, the book is a good example of how to promote better understanding between two nations or cultures, in the spirit of the author's uncle, Edward Said, to whom the book is dedicated, together with his wife Elora and his aunt, Rosemarie Said Zahlan. It thus carries on the debate started by the work of A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800-1901: a Study of Educational, Literary and Religious Work*, (OUP, 1966), but in a constructive spirit, and with a far deeper understanding of the American context from which the missionaries came, and it deserves to be widely-read by students of mission, culture, religion and international relations, as well as of history and of American and Middle Eastern Studies.

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