The American Presbyterian Mission in Egypt: Significant Factors in Its Establishment

by Stanley H. Skreslet II

WHEN THOMAS McCAGUE AND JAMES BARNETT reached Cairo in 1854, their new mission was a relative latecomer to the scene of nineteenth-century Protestant mission efforts. The first American missionaries to the Near East had been Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons in 1820. Egypt did not have any permanent American missionary presence before the arrival of McCague and Barnett, although the Church Missionary Society of England had sent representatives to Cairo as early as 1825. Though late in coming, this missionary work of the Associate Reformed Church (later the United Presbyterian Church of North America) could claim by the end of the century to have founded the largest native Protestant body in the Near East. The full story of these efforts is a fascinating episode in the history of American Presbyterianism and has been told at length elsewhere.[1] Very little, however, has been done to analyze this material. Specifically, it remains to be explained exactly how the American Mission survived when other Protestant efforts had failed before in Egypt. One wonders, too, why this group was able to overcome many of the same obstacles that effectively obstructed work in other near eastern countries.

It would hardly be appropriate to speak of missionary "success" quantitatively except that the missionaries themselves, their boards and their supporting constituencies very often spoke of their achievements in these terms. Forward movement had to be measured somehow, and mission dollars given so faithfully at home had to be accounted for in the field. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, such progress and accountability were regularly reckoned in terms of conversions to Protestantism and in the size of the native Protestant church founded by the missionaries. One need only consult several of the yearbooks or encyclopedias of missions which proliferated at the turn of the century to see that statistics played an important role in the work of evaluating missionary effectiveness.[2]

Given this frame of reference, the American Presbyterian Mission in Egypt was relatively successful. By 1900 the Egyptian census enumerated 12,500 Protestants out of a total Coptic (*i.e.*, not Muslim or foreign) population of 612,000.[3] Only the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions among Armenians in Turkey could approach this. After the massacres of 1895-96, however, the violence done to the Armenian community and the marked increase in emigration from the area had devastated the Armenian Protestant Church.[4] Today the visible legacy of the American Mission in Egypt must certainly include the Coptic Evangelical Church, which is the largest Protestant sect in the Near East. Betts reported in 1978

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that four out of every five Middle Eastern Protestants (200,000 out of 250,000) were of Coptic descent, in Egypt.[5] By far, the great majority of their forebears had been brought to Protestantism by American Presbyterians.

Egypt presented the missionaries with some unique problems and opportunities as a mission field. It also was representative of other previously occupied fields in the Muslim world. The ways in which the missionaries developed their methods and attitudes in the face of these new factors and familiar conditions is the story of the American Mission in Egypt.

The primary sources to be used in this analysis will be the accounts given by the missionaries themselves. These obviously have their own apologetic bias since they strive to put the mission's work in the best possible light. But these materials are nevertheless useful insofar as they present the basic chronological sequence of events in the life of the mission. They also give us an insight into the decision-making process which took place among the missionaries in the field in cooperation with the board back home. Materials pertaining to other Protestant missions in the Near East will be utilized in order to provide a basis of comparison with regard to methodology and progress. Finally, secondary sources will be consulted for information not available from the missionaries themselves, such as extensive demographic data or political history.

Demography and Geography

The main facts of Egyptian geography are well known. Egypt, as Herodotus observed, is the gift of the Nile. In practical terms this meant that most Egyptians lived either in the Nile valley south of Cairo or in the delta. There were also villages on Sinai, along the Red Sea and in the oases, but these were not significant in size. Long before the introduction of the railroad or automobile to Egypt, this string of settlements was easily accessible, by boat. *Dahabiyya* (wind-powered crafts) were able to navigate the Nile from Alexandria to the first cataract at Aswan, a distance of 750 miles.

When the first Presbyterian missionaries reached Alexandria there were approximately eight million inhabitants in the country. Only 250,000-300,000 lived in Cairo, the capital and largest city, so it is easy to see that most were rural farmers or small town dwellers.[6] Adherents of Islam greatly outnumbered the Coptic Christians, but unlike other predominantly Muslim countries of the Near East, the Christian minority constituted a significant 7-10% of the population.[7] Egypt's Christians were not evenly distributed throughout the country. Presbyterian missionary Gulian Lansing wrote in 1864 his impression that the Christians of Egypt were concentrated in the south, above Cairo, a fact which is supported by the exhaustive data collected by Betts.[8] The heartland of Christian Egypt was to be found between Beni-Suef and Luxor.

What the first missionaries to Egypt found, then, was a situation that resembled in a few ways some of the other more familiar mission fields in the Near East. As in Turkey or Persia, the missionaries were to find an Orthodox minority most of whom lived away from the capital in a cluster of cities. Just as one could speak of an Armenian district in Turkey or the Nestorian plain of Mosul (Urumiah), there was a Coptic Christian area of Egypt. An advantage presented itself to the missionaries in Egypt, however. Unlike Turkey or Persia, this large group of Christians could easily be reached by boat on the Nile. To illustrate this point, it may be pointed out that American Board pioneers Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight needed sixteen months to complete their survey of the Armenian and Nestorian communities in Eastern Turkey and Western Persia.[9] In their initial itineration, McCague and his wife were able to travel the length of the Nile from Cairo to Luxor and back again within two months.

The Presbyterian missionaries adapted their methods to fit this particular geographic and demographic situation. Since the decision had been made early on to concentrate on evangelism among the native Orthodox Christians, the mission sought means to place themselves regularly in Middle Egypt where the Copts lived. They first of all took the rather expensive step of purchasing a boat that could be used for itineration. The "Ibis" was bought in 1860, even before permission was granted officially by the Board of Foreign Missions. Writing in 1864, Gulian Lansing explained to the Board the reasons for executing this project:

> The people among whom we are called to labor are the Copts, and the Copts are mostly in the upper country. . . . We cannot undertake this work by personal, permanent residence among them . . . for we have not the men; . . . To attempt this work we needed a boat of our own.[10]

A further consideration is recounted by Lansing and involved the issue of the missionaries' health. Unlike Syria, whence Barnett and Lansing had come to Egypt, there were no mountain resorts to which the missionaries could retire in the hot months. It was suggested that a "change" could be effected for a sick missionary family by assigning them to the boat for two or three months' time.[11] Thus, by adopting this means of itineration, the mission not only extended its influence among the Copts in Middle Egypt, but found a way to meet the health needs of the missionaries. That both crucial concerns could be addressed in one action was an important advantage for the mission.

Using a Nile boat was also an extremely efficient method of evangelism.[12] Since settlements were sprinkled along the banks of the river, it was possible to visit any promising village just by tying up the boat nearby. When proceeding upriver against the current, the missionaries allowed favorable winds to dictate their ports of call. As long as progress south could be maintained they continued their voyage, but when the winds died they would tie up and try to distribute Bibles and acquaint themselves with the notables of the local Coptic community. If this providential encounter proved auspicious, the missionary would stop again on the return trip to maintain contact. Generally speaking, the idea was to move upriver as quickly as the winds allowed and then to descend at a pace determined by the flow of events. Most often, the travel between villages was done at night so that no time was lost. If a particularly good opportunity presented itself, the missionary might tarry for a month or more. If, on the other hand, an emergency called him back to Cairo, a swift passage was usually assured thanks to the strong Nile current. Compared to the missionaries toiling in eastern Turkey or western Persia, the American Mission in Egypt realized a number of benefits from the "Ibis" not already mentioned. The "Ibis" provided efficient access to the villages, a clean kitchen, a means of transporting literature to be distributed, and a place where the missionaries could entertain guests or receive visitors. These were important considerations, especially in the beginning of their work before permanent stations had been established upriver.

It was not long before the mission realized that such a station ought to be opened in Middle Egypt. A decision was made at the January meeting of Presbytery in 1865 to establish a new outpost at Asyut. This was a major tactical move that would influence the direction of the mission from that time on. Instead of being centered in the large cities of lower Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria, the mission was to shift its center of gravity south. This move was a significant departure in strategy from that employed by all the missions which had preceded them. Latourette reports, for instance, that the Roman Catholics had been present for two hundred years by 1840 but had erected church buildings only in Cairo and Alexandria.[13] The Moravians had labored for almost fifty

Commemorative calling card tray

years in the eighteenth century primarily in Cairo but also in the small town Behnessa in Middle Egypt, where some Copts had responded to their message.[14] Apparently, no institutions were founded or congregations established by the Moravians either in Cairo or Behnessa. The Church Missionary Society followed the Moravians in 1825. They traveled throughout Egypt distributing literature but founded schools only in Cairo.[15] In 1865 the remaining member of this initial CMS group died and no replacements were sent until 1882.[16]

In the years immediately following its establishment as a mission station in 1865, Asyut became increasingly important as a center of mission activity. Regular services were conducted by John Hogg. The mission school, begun on earlier trips south but discontinued, was reopened. In 1868 the first Presbyterian missionary physician to come to Egypt was stationed in Asyut. The first Evangelical congregation in Asyut was organized in 1870, and in that same year a church building was erected for its use. A theological class had been transferred to Asyut as well during this period. An advanced academy for boys, later known as the Asyut Training College, was added in 1870, and a girls' boarding school followed in 1879. By 1895, it could be said that the mission was strongest in and around Asyut.[17] Without a doubt, the decision to expand operations in the South, coupled as it was with a decision to preach the Reformed faith primarily to the Copts, was a pivotal move that prepared the way for the phenomenal growth of the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Missionary Experience

A full generation of American missionary energy had been expended by 1854, when the Presbyterians came to Egypt. The evangelical enthusiasm of New England, which had propelled Parsons and Fisk to the Near East, also launched numerous reinforcements. Mission societies in Europe were also becoming active at this time. Typically, the missionaries of this period came to the Near East to work among one of the three predominant religious groups. Missions to the Jews took place in almost every country. At least two societies were established in Egypt for this purpose before 1854.[18] The conversion of Muslims was a stated aim of almost every mission organization but was seldom realized as a sole purpose. Numerous missionaries spent their lives working among Orthodox Christians.

Many lessons were learned during the first thirty-five years of Protestant missions to the Near East. Those who labored among the Jews found a willingness among them to have their children educated by the mission, but efforts to evangelize met with little response. Andrew Watson reported that "the Jews, who might number a few thousands in Cairo and Alexandria, had a missionary working among them, but with great discouragement, and it was not many years before the Society [i.e. the Jewish Mission] gave up

the effort as fruitless."[19]

So it was also among the Muslims. Throughout the Near East governments were controlled by Muslims, and those governments supported the notion that had been established in the seventh century and upheld since then within the Islamic community: changing one's religion is permissible only when a Christian, Jew or pagan wishes to become a Muslim. The penalty for apostasy from Islam was death. Under these conditions it was not surprising that few came to embrace Christianity by renouncing Islam. The conclusion of one observer was that "by any estimate no more than a few hundred converts had been made by the missionaries in Persia and the Ottoman Empire by midcentury."[20]

In the face of discouragement in proselytizing Jews and Muslims, most of the mission societies turned their attention to the native Christians of the Near East. It was thought that the spread of the Gospel was being impeded by the poor witness of Orthodox Christianity. Representative of this opinion is the following statement by Rufus Anderson, foreign secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions:

> We may not hope for the conversion of Mohammedans unless true Christianity be exemplified before them by the Oriental Churches. To them the native Christians represent the Christian religion, and they see that these are no better than themselves. They think them worse; and therefore the Moslem believes the Koran to be more excellent than the Bible. . . . Hence a wise plan for the conversion of the Mohammedans of Western Asia necessarily involved, first, a mission to the Oriental Churches.[21]

It was not at all clear to the missionaries just what form their work ought to take with respect to the Oriental churches. Their chief concern was to have a living witness given to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. But how ought this be done in the Near East when ancient churches had survived Islam but did not give evidence of the evangelical faith the missionaries envisioned? On this point a split occurred among the mission organizations. Some decided to work for the regeneration of native Orthodox churches from within and refused to encourage Orthodox Christians to leave Orthodoxy for Protestantism. Others came to the opinion that renewal within Orthodox churches would happen only when a Protestant sect emerged.

Of the former view the Church Missionary Society work in Egypt was quite representative. As Latourette put it: "That body [the CMS], while still young, dreamed of stimulating the Eastern Churches in such a fashion that they would become active in spreading the Christian faith among Moslems and pagans."[22] The CMS planned to work *with* the Coptic clergy by establishing schools (including one for the clergy—an innovation at that time) and by aiding in the distribution of Scriptures. When the Presbyterians arrived in 1854, this initial phase of the CMS work in Egypt was winding down. Only one of the original group of five missionaries remained. No replacements had been or would be sent. However laudable the goals of the CMS were, the *visible* results were meagre. After forty years the schools had been closed or transferred to other hands and only a "small handful" of converts had been gathered in from Islam.

The failure of the CMS to sustain its mission work in Egypt stood in sharp contrast to the continuing witness borne by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Syria and Turkey. While the American Board did not come to the Near East with the fixed plan of establishing separate Protestant churches, there was a certain receptivity to this idea. As early as 1827 about twenty persons approached the missionaries and indicated that they would like to become Protestants.[23] By accepting the professions of faith of these formerly Orthodox Christians, a statement concerning the methods of the American Board had been made. As Joseph Tracey, an early historian of the American Board, observed: "This gather-

ing of the converts into a new church was an important event. It announced distinctly that, so far as the mission should be *successful,* existing ecclesiastical relations were to be broken up, and the existing churches destroyed."[24] These individual conversions were followed by the organization of congregations. In 1850 the final administrative step was taken—the Protestants were recognized as a separate "millet" under Ottoman law. Now those who decided to leave their native ecclesiastical communities could do so without forfeiting the civil rights which had been provided through those communities. Protestantism had been legitimized in the eyes of the law and the missionaries had created an institution which could endure short-term vicissitudes.

It is certain that the Presbyterian missionaries who came to Egypt at mid-century knew something about the previous thirty-five years and the work that had been attempted in the Near East during that time. They had learned of the work among the Jews in Egypt from several resident missionaries, particularly a Mr. Lawrie with whom the McCagues and Barnett first lodged in Cairo.[25] Soon after arriving they made the acquaintance of J.R.T. Leider of the CMS by attending his Episcopal Sunday services.[26] The work of the American Board in Turkey and Syria was also known in its essentials. Barnett had come, of course, from ten years' residence in Syria. It is likely that he had had some contact with the missionaries of the American Board, even though they were quartered in and around Beirut while the Presbyterians of the Associate Reformed Church occupied Damascus. Gulian Lansing, who came to Egypt in 1856, also spent five years in Damascus. Presbyterians at home were not interested only in the mission work of their own denomination. The chief organ for distributing missionary news among the ministers and members of the Associate Reformed Church was the *Christian Instructor*. In the twelve issues published in 1854, the year of the McCagues' departure for Egypt, no less than three reports were printed which had been submitted by the American Board or its missionaries, and at least four references were made to the work of the American Board in Syria and Turkey in letters from members of the Presbyterian mission stationed at Damascus.[27] There was intense interest in the political situation in Turkey at this time because it was feared that the Crimean War would turn into a religious conflict and that Christians in the Ottoman Empire would soon face persecution. It should also be added that the Associate Reformed Church was represented on the American Board and so had more than a casual interest in their work.[28]

What then did the American Mission in Egypt do with this accumulated wisdom? With regard to strategy, they did not establish a mission aimed primarily at the conversion of Jews or Muslims. If either of these had been the primary target, the mission would have confined itself to Cairo and Alexandria. The only reason to stretch their ranks thin by establishing stations up-country was to increase their contact with the Copts. This was the reason behind the purchase of the Nile boat and the early goal of putting a missionary family in Asyut as soon as practicable.

The mission's tactics with regard to the Copts also became evident from the beginning. The Americans did not adopt the quiet way of the CMS. Contact was made with the Copts in order to make known the principle tenets of Protestantism. The early methods of the Presbyterians are chronicled in Gulian Lansing's book, *Egypt's Princes*. Lansing tells of a long stay in Luxor and his attempts to convince the local Coptic bishop of the error of his ways. Lansing claims to want to work with the bishop to establish a school in the area. In fact, the offer of mission support for the school is treated as means of pressure by Lansing. When the bishop withdrew his permission for Lansing to preach in the Coptic Sunday services, the mission

money for the school was no longer available.

Throughout his narrative Lansing attacks the rites of the Coptic church as idolatrous at worst and imcomprehensible at best. He saw in the accumulated traditions of the Copts (*e.g.*, the use of icons, the veneration of the Virgin Mary, and the statues of the Saints) nothing more than a pack of superstitions. The "Kuddus" or Holy Mass seemed to him "a meaningless ceremony" because no one understood what was being proclaimed in the Coptic language. Then there was the moral life of the clergy. Lansing believed that the bishop was a frequent imbiber of hard liquor and thought him unscrupulous in the handling of money. In short, the American missionaries came to regard the Copts as a mission field and not as co-religionists. Watson's description sums up this attitude. The Coptic Church was

> Christian in name, Christian in form, it was well typified by the mummified human body taken out of the tombs. Externally a perfect body but no intelligence in the head, no motion in the limbs, no life in the heart, wound up in memories of fathers and councils, waiting for the Lord to say to some earnest souls, "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O! ye dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord . . . Come, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."[29]

The American Mission learned also from its predecessors in the field the value of schools and medical missions. From the time of Parsons and Fisk, schools had been used as a wedge to enter the local community. The missionaries found that their schools were popular and that they were necessary if people were going to be able to read the Scriptures that the missionaries were trying so hard to put into their hands. Another purpose of the schools was to train an educated clergy. A whole school system had to be developed in countries where no such system existed. Egypt is a case in point. Watson noted the value of the schools in the work of evangelism when he outlined the following summary of tactics:

> In many places in the delta at the present time [1896], as in many places in the upper country in the early history of the mission, the schools seemed to be the only means by which the missionary can get an entrance into the town. As soon as an entrance is effected and a little community of Protestants is formed, then the school is gradually passed over to the natives or dropped entirely.[30]

Watson is speaking here primarily of schools in the villages or "out-stations." Other schools in the system included day and boarding schools at the "central stations," the Asyut Training College, and the Theological Seminary. For those going on to the seminary, the Training College at Asyut was viewed as a preparatory step. This preparation was essential, according to Watson, for "men not college trained have been put in the ministry; in every case they have proved inferior to the college trained men."[31] The schools also provided contact with Muslims, something that preaching did not do effectively. The Bible was used as a textbook and the missionaries taught the Protestant religion as a subject to all and encouraged attendance at the Sunday school.[32]

Medical missions were not as extensive but they were also an efficient means to gain access to Muslims and to some Orthodox Christians who were otherwise reluctant to have contact with the Protestants. Rufus Anderson considered the use of the medical missionary in these terms:

> It is in the early stage of a mission that the value of a pious physician is most apparent. With the exaggerated conceptions usually entertained of the temporal blessings he is able to confer, he is welcomed by all classes from the first. Every door is opened, every man and woman is accessible. The good will thus awakened is more or less shared by his fellow missionaries, and is thus likely to be all the sooner confirmed by a spiritual appreciation of the Gospel.[33]

Anderson wrote this in connection with Dr. Asahel Grant, an amazing pioneer who worked among the Nestorians in Persia and eastern Turkey. Grant exploited his medical skill to such an extent that he was able to penetrate Kurdistan without serious injury (a previous western visitor had

been murdered) and succeeded in gaining an audience with the Nestorian Patriarch. As it happened, Grant assured his safe passage by curing the local Kurdish chief of a fever.[34]

The Presbyterians in Egypt had no colorful figure to rival Asahel Grant, but there was a steady use of medical missionaries in the field, primarily away from Cairo. Dr. D.R. Johnston, already mentioned, worked in Asyut from 1868 to 1875. Dr. E.E. Lansing (1884-88) and Dr. L.M. Henry (1891-1927) followed him to Asyut and set up clinics. By 1901 a hospital had been built in Asyut and associates for Dr. Henry were sent out from America soon thereafter.

The first years of the American Mission in Egypt were influenced by the previous efforts of Protestant missionaries in the Near East. The Presbyterians benefited from the trial and error process which had transpired beforehand. In the short span of thirty-five years, the Near East had become a known quantity to the Protestants. In Egypt the Missionaries could make use of this knowledge in allocating their time and resources.

Political Considerations

The year 1854 marked not only the arrival of McCague and Barnett in Cairo but also the accession of Said Pasha to power in Egypt. His reign (1854-63) meant a significant change in the fortunes of Europeans, who had been out of favor under Abbas Pasha (1848-54). Abbas has been described as "generally reactionary and despotic."[35] Said, on the other hand, was well disposed towards the West. The 1850s also saw an increase in the political influence exerted by the western powers (Britain and France), especially after the Crimean War. With this influence came pressure on the Ottoman Empire to allow for more religious liberty within its realm. For a time it appeared that restrictions would be lifted which had previously precluded the conversion of a Muslim to the Christian faith.

The combination of Said's accession to the viceregal throne in Egypt and the relative religious liberalism which was becoming stronger in the Ottoman Empire (Egypt was nominally under the rule of the Sultan) was beneficial to the American Mission in Egypt. These benefits did not produce a rash of converts from Islam but rather the conditions under which the Mission could establish itself. Specifically, what the American Mission gained from this set of political circumstances was relief from the xenophobia that prevailed under Abbas, the freedom to encourage native Christians to change their affiliation from Orthodoxy to Protestantism and, in time of need, the assistance of western diplomats whose power and influence were growing.

The reign of Said Pasha and that of his successor, the Khedive Ismail (1863-79) resulted in a renewed atmosphere of prowestern feeling within Egypt. This involved a toleration of westerners. Also there was actually a turn to the West for new technology and the prestige of things foreign increased. Some of the more memorable aspects of this occidental embrace are well known: the construction and costly opening of the Suez Canal, the commissioning of *Aida* for the new opera house in Cairo. Less well known, perhaps, was the growing military reputation of the United States in the Near East generally and the actual participation of American officers in the service of the Khedive after the American Civil War. For some time, America's naval presence was effected by the Mediterranean Squadron that had been left in the area to protect American interests following the peace treaty of 1815 with Algeria which had ended the Barbary wars.[36] An American had been employed by the Sultan to help rebuild his fleet after the disaster of Navarino in 1827.[37] Under Ismail several groups of former Union and Confederate officers were employed in the 1870s; even the chief of the Egyptian General Staff was an American, General Charles P. Stone.[38]

Non-military technology was introduced to Egypt in the latter half of the nineteenth century as well. Of particular interest was the steam engine, an innovation which was heralded by some as the ultimate symbol of western power, intelligence and enterprise. Lansing gave an interesting critique of this view that new technology could lead Egypt into an age of European style civilized modernity in his book *Egypt's Princes*.[39] Although Lansing was correct in saying that the steam engine or the telegraph could never lead Egypt to the moral regeneration which he envisioned, he could not deny that the lure of these things and their prestige made the missionaries more popular. As far as the establishment of the mission was concerned, this feeling of western attractiveness contrasted favorably with the reactionary rejection of the West under Abbas.

Of even more practical importance to the future of the mission was the growth of the consular powers in Egypt. The American consul general to Egypt, William S. Thayer, was instrumental in obtaining land for the mission in 1862 as a gift from Said Pasha. Later, under Ismail, the government wanted to exchange that land for another plot across the street from the famous Shepheard's Hotel. Again the consul general helped out during the intricate negotiations and the mission was assisted further by the American ambassador to Istanbul who happened to be visiting Egypt at that time. The ambassador, as Watson pointed out, was then the Vice President of the American Bible Society and "took a deep interest in the Mission and the Negotiations."[40]

The American missionaries also appealed to the consuls whenever their freedom to preach Protestantism among the Copts was challenged. The mission did not attempt to force the issue with the government on the right of a Muslim to become a Christian. Even after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, a time when many inquirers came to the mission because they thought that the persecution of converts from Islam would disappear, there were few actual conversions because social conditions would not permit it. Watson called these social conditions "the Muhammedan esprit de corps that is so strong that a brother will kill his brother and a father his son rather than see them become Christians."[41]

The American Mission would not accept a similar restriction on its activities among the Copts. When challenged by the new Patriarch of Alexandria in 1867, the missionaries made full use of British and American consular powers. Having become alarmed at the expansion of the Presbyterian mission into the area of Asyut, Patriarch Demetrius II (1862-70) made a "grand tour" of Middle Egypt in hopes of stemming the flow of events. According to Watson, the Patriarch tried to induce the Egyptian leaders of the fledgling Protestant communities in Kus, Ekhmim and Asyut to return to the Coptic Church and accept his authority. When this approach proved unsuccessful, he attempted to break up the Protestant schools. A scheme was worked out whereby the pupils of the American schools would no longer be exempt from the forced-labor conscriptions of the government, but the students attending Coptic schools would receive special certificates guaranteeing their exemption. One boy who refused to leave the American school was tortured with the bastinado. The Patriarch also threatened some Protestant sympathizers with banishment to the White Nile, the implication being that the Egyptian government would support him in his opposition to the Protestants.[42]

Throughout this series of confrontations with the Coptic hierarchy, the missionaries were calling on the secular western powers to aid them. Many letters were written not only to the American consul general but also to the British consul general and to the U.S. Secretary of State. Watson claimed that the inaction of the U.S. government on behalf of the American missionaries sabotaged the mission's

fight against the Patriarch.[43] In fact the opposite effect had been produced as a result of the missionaries' efforts and the support of the consuls. No leaders of the Protestant communities were permanently banished to the White Nile.[44] Protestant school certificates were again recognized by the government on an equal basis with the Coptic school certificates. Finally, the government lost interest in what was seen as an ecclesiastical quarrel rather than a national problem. If anything, the efforts of the Patriarch served to focus attention on the missionaries and to publicize their message, and people came in ever greater numbers to hear the Protestant criticism of the rites and practices of the Orthodox Church. Without the consular powers a completely different conclusion might have been reached. There simply were no other forces that the missionaries could have brought to bear in order to counteract the influence of the Coptic Patriarch at the Khedival Court.

Presbyterian Polity

When the Presbyterians came to Egypt, they brought not only their Reformed faith but also their form of church government. At first glance that may not seem to be a crucial contribution, yet there are ways in which this peculiar characteristic of the American Mission to Egypt helped the missionaries to achieve their goal of preaching the Protestant faith. The primary way that the Presbyterian system helped was by providing a means through which native clergy could be incorporated into the work of the mission.

The first presbytery was organized in 1860. Three years later the first native congregation, in Cairo, was organized. The same year the Theological Seminary was formally instituted and six potential native pastors were matriculated.[45] The presbytery continued to be an entirely American affair until the ordination and installation of the Reverend Tadros Yusif. Watson's report is as follows:

> A call was made out by the Nakheilah congregation for Mr. Tadros Yusif, who had been their pastor, and was by him accepted, and at a meeting of presbytery held Oct. 31, 1871, he was solemnly set apart to the ministry of the Word and installed pastor over the Lord's people there. This was the first meeting of presbytery at which the business was transacted in the Arabic language, and in which Egyptians were members, and this was the first [native] pastorate which was formed in connection with our mission in Egypt.[46]

It was not even two months before the next congregation, at Mutiah, was organized and Tadros Yusif participated in the commission representing presbytery. These events marked the beginning of a transition process. Over the years to follow, the total control of the American Mission over the Protestant Church in Egypt would be loosened as more Egyptian members were added to the rolls of presbytery. It is true that an organization consisting of the foreign missionary personnel only was created at this time as well. The Mission Association, as it was called, handled all "secular and missionary" matters such as the administration of property owned by the mission, of schools operated by the mission, the appointment of missionaries to certain fields of work, and the care of funds sent from America.[47] Presbytery, on the other hand, was to have jurisdiction over the ecclesiastical business of the Egyptian Protestant Church including "the admittance of students of theology, their licensure, ordination, organization of churches, appointment of native religious workers, and the use of money collected in the native churches."[48]

The fact that the mission was willing to admit Egyptians to presbytery and treat them as equals in ecclesiastical matters was a big step toward the goal of raising up an indigenous clergy. Not all missionary organizations were willing to relinquish even this much control over the churches they had founded. A case in point is the mission of the American Board in Syria. The first congregation was organized at Beirut in 1848, twenty-six years after work there had begun. At that time the mission

also "advised its 'native brethren' to postpone electing a pastor."[49] Six years later the mission considered the request of the Beirut congregation to have Butrus Al-Bustani ordained as their pastor and declined to do so.[50] Another promising candidate, Hanna Wortabet, was rejected on the basis of his theological views soon thereafter. The result of these actions, according to A.L. Tibawi, was that, "Thus the most promising native converts were rejected as unsuitable for implementing the policy of native autonomy. In the nine stations and the four churches, American control remained complete and American influence supreme."[51] This state of affairs continued throughout the 1860s and into the 1870s. Twenty-five years after the first congregation was established, "there were neither independent churches nor independent pastors. . . . Control of native spiritual affairs seems to have become a habit with the mission; evidence of relaxing it is hard to find."[52]

Things did not improve much after the mission was transferred to the oversight of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions in 1870. The Beirut congregation asked for a native pastor again in 1880, but circumstances within the Syrian Protestant community as well as a failure of the mission to act forcefully in favor of the nominee resulted in no action at all.[53] The first presbytery was not organized until 1883 and even then no rapid progress was made in the cause of "native autonomy." The Beirut congregation did, however finally get a native pastor in 1890, forty-two years after its organization.[54]

The experience of the American Board in Turkey was similar to that in Syria. The congregational system was followed and this meant that individual churches were formed and each "enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy."[55] Richter provides a number of details in his *History of Missions in the Near East*. He noted that the absence of any central authority required that "the missionaries traveled hither and thither trying to establish their influence in the congregations, supporting, comforting, advising and admonishing both the native pastors and catechists and the congregations themselves."[56] This is a surprisingly frank description, as it comes from one who extolled the virtues of the democratic system of congregations choosing their own native leadership. Although there were more native pastors in Turkey than in Syria, one is left with the impression that turning over total control of an autonomous congregation to a native pastor was too big a step to take for the missionaries in Turkey, just as it had been in Syria.

If this pattern of forming churches had been rigorously followed in perpetuity in Turkey, then there would have been no end to the need for a foreign missionary presence. This is because the missionaries alone claimed the right to "allow" congregations to be formed, and afterwards, as shown above, the missionaries assumed the prerogative of supervision. It became clear that some kind of body would need to be formed if a transfer of control from foreign to indigenous hands were ever to take place. Such an institution was created in 1864 and bore the name of "The Union of the Protestant Armenian Churches of Bythynia." This regional association, resembling the presbytery in function, was followed by three other Unions representing different geographical areas in Asia Minor. The process of establishing an institutional system that could organize congregations, ordain pastors and discipline them was completed thirty-seven years after the formation of the first Armenian Protestant congregation. Richter's account, again perhaps more revealing than originally intended, is as follows: "After a visitation from America in 1883, the Unions were constitutionally organized and extended."[57]

The point of the foregoing descriptions has been to illustrate the uniqueness of the American Mission in Egypt's approach to the problem of native leadership. All of the mission organizations who worked

among Orthodox Christians spoke of the need to raise up a native clergy. A constantly pronounced goal was to enable native Protestants to stand unassisted so that they could take on the task of evangelizing Muslims.[58] It may be argued that the American Mission In Egypt came closest to that goal precisely because Presbyterian polity provided for an institution, the presbytery, which could accommodate a gradual and orderly transfer of control. The alternative employed by the American Board, total control over individual congregations by the missionaries until the native clergy were "ready," made for some extremely long waits. Such a policy could only produce frustration and discourage potential native pastors from seeking a clerical vocation.

An additional aspect to this problem of control over ecclesiastical matters is that of discipline. In the cases of Butrus al-Bustani and Hanna Wortabet mentioned above, there were theological differences between these potential pastors and the missionaries. The fact that no native organization existed which had the power to decide matters of theological interpretation meant that the dispute became a foreign versus native conflict. That, too, was a situation which could only frustrate and discourage the Syrian Protestant converts. In Egypt, a situation which could have developed into a similar confrontation occurred in 1869. A member of the American Mission, B.F. Pinkerton, began to espouse the doctrines of the Plymouth Brethren. After it was made clear that his fellow missionaries did not approve of his new theology, he resigned and returned to America. Subsequently he wintered in Egypt over a period of years and used these visits to spread his views among the native pastors of the mission-founded church. Several Egyptian pastors were sympathetic to Pinkerton's views and two openly embraced them. Schism became a very real threat and the need for confrontation was obvious. Fortunately, discipline could be administered through the presbytery. Two pastors were dismissed from their charges by the action of a joint Egyptian-American body. The "Plymouthite" movement soon dissipated. No accusations could be made by the dismissed pastors claiming that foreign control was interfering with a natural process of indigenization. The Presbyterian system of government had endured this challenge and proved itself equal to the task.

The following editorial comment appeared in the September 1854 issue of the *Christian Instructor,* one month before the departure of Thomas McCague for Egypt:

> On his entering upon the field [Syria for training] and becoming able to engage in the work, it is probable that other points [*i.e.*, Egypt], towards which the eyes of the brethren [in Damascus] have been anxiously turned, will be occupied, and thus the leaven of the Gospel be more rapidly and widely spread abroad.[59]

So began the Presbyterian missionary venture into Egypt. An extension of American Presbyterianism was indeed founded and so the Reformed leaven of the Gospel that the missionaries had in mind was spread for many years to come. Quite understandably, the Coptic Orthodox hierarchy resisted this intrusion into its jurisdiction. But the Copts were unable to prevent the establishment of a native Protestant sect in their midst, the membership of which was drawn primarily from the Orthodox Church itself.

The success of the mission effort sprang from the unique constellation of factors discussed above. Some of these factors, geographic, demographic and those pertaining to the internal political situation, were encountered as intrinsic features of this mission field. The practices of Presbyterian polity were brought to Egypt by the missionaries themselves. Other considerations, like the general state of affairs in the Ottoman Empire and the increasing influence of the West, impinged upon the political and religious realities of Egypt from without. Finally the American Mission in Egypt fell heir to the experience of

those Protestants who had labored in the Near East for some thirty-five years. The missionaries could hardly take credit for creating this particular working situation. They can, however, be recognized for choosing an opportune time to begin their new missionary venture, for perspicacity in analyzing the field, and for adapting their methods to fit this specific set of circumstances.

NOTES

[1] The official published histories of the American Mission in Egypt are Andrew Watson, *The American Mission in Egypt*, (Pittsburgh, 1904) and E.E. Elder, *Vindicating a Vision*, (Philadelphia, 1958).

[2] See, for example, E.M. Bliss, *Encyclopedia of Missions*, v. 2, (New York, 1891) and J.S. Dennis, *Centennial Survey of Foreign Missions*, (New York, 1902).

[3] Robert B. Betts, *Christians in the Arab East*, (Atlanta, 1975), p. 245.

[4] E.M. Bliss tells us, for example, that there were 106 Armenian Protestant churches with 9,841 members in 1889 (vol. 1, p. 102). By 1938 only 16 churches founded by the American Board were left with a total of 820 members among them (*cf.* Joseph I. Parker, *Interpretive Statistical Survey of the World Mission of the Christian Church*, (New York, 1938), p. 64.

[5] Betts, p. 58.

[6] These figures (8 million total population and 250,000–300,000 population in Cairo) are quoted by Watson from a letter by Barnett and McCague written in 1855 (*cf.* Watson, p. 38).

[7] Betts pulls together several important sources, governmental and scholarly, which bear on this question of religious demography in Egypt. See Betts, pp. 58–66.

[8] See Gulian Lansing, *Egypt's Princes*, (New York, 1865), pp. 8*f.* and Betts, pp. 61*ff.*, 229*f.*

[9] Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and the Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia*, vols. I and II, (Boston, 1833).

[10] Lansing, pp. 11*ff.* Lansing quotes from a letter sent to the Board from the Mission in 1860.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 15*f.*

[12] Lansing's book, *Egypt's Princes*, is essentially a diary of one such trip up the Nile.

[13] K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, VI, (New York, 1944), pp. 23*f.*

[14] Watson, p. 23.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[16] Latourette, p. 25.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[18] Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East*, (Edinburgh, 1910), pp. 398*f.*

[19] Watson, p. 59.

[20] D.H. Finnie, *Pioneers East*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 134.

[21] Rufus Anderson, *History of the Missions of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to the Oriental Churches*, (Boston, 1872), p. 1.

[22] Latourette, p. 25.

[23] Joseph Tracy, *History of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, (New York, 1842), pp. 190*f.*

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 191. It is important to realize also that many of these early converts to Protestantism were pushed out of their own Orthodox Churches when they began to espouse Protestant principles while trying to remain Orthodox Church members. The choice for the missionaries, in such cases, was either to receive them formally into Protestantism by recognizing their profession of faith or to leave them in limbo, outside of any church community.

[25] Watson, pp. 69*f.*

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[27] *Christian Instructor*, 10: 122, 132*f.*, 278*f.*, 346, 494*f.*, 629*f.*, 631. Two of these references were in letters sent by Barnett and Lansing!

[28] James A. Field, Jr., *America and the Mediterranean World, 1776–1882*, (Princeton, 1969), p. 88.

[29] Watson, p. 58.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 443.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 454.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 443*f.*

[33] Anderson, pp. 176*f.*

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 186–95 and Finnie, pp. 215*ff.*, 227–41.

[35] P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt*, 2nd Ed., (Baltimore, 1980), p. 71.

[36] Field, p. 105.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 141–75.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 391.

[39] Lansing, pp. 136–55.

[40] Watson, pp. 138, 288*f.*; Lansing, p. 422.

[41] Watson, p. 360.

[42] The story of this incident is told in full in *ibid.*, pp. 199–236. This reaction of the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria shows clearly the significance of the mission's decision to locate itself primarily in Middle Egypt. The years 1865–70 were crucial ones in this regard. The Patriarch saw correctly that his authority was being directly challenged. The missionaries, of course, viewed his fulminations as impediments to the work of the Holy Spirit. Their objective was obviously to deplete the Coptic communion and to establish rival congregations.

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 237*f.* By this Watson is claiming that the side of spiritual truth had won, rather than the side with the heaviest gauge of secular power at its disposal.

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 112*f.*

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 294*f.*

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 281*ff.*, includes the constitution of the Mission Association in draft form.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 284.

[49] A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800–1901*, (Oxford, 1966), p. 121.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 131*f.*

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 237.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 281.

[55] Richter, p. 120.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

[58] Watson, pp. 420*f.*; Rufus Anderson, quoted in Tibawi, pp. 107, 129*ff.*

[59] *Christian Instructor*, 10:535.