

# Saving Sinners, even Moslems



# Saving Sinners, even Moslems:

*The Arabian Mission  
(1889-1973) and its  
Intellectual Roots*

By

Jerzy Zdanowski

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Seek, and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened  
—Matthew 7: 7

For not by eastern windows only  
    When daylight comes, comes in the light;  
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!  
    But westward, look, the land is bright.  
—Arthur H. Clough, *Say not the Struggle naught Availeth*



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## INTRODUCTION

This book is about the Arabian Mission – one of many Christian missions sent to the Muslim lands to preach the gospel and invite Muslims to “consider Jesus.” This book is a narration about the American missionaries who encountered a new culture and a new religion and who spent sometimes many years living with native people and dealing with them, and this really got them thinking about their experience. This text contains many references to Samuel M. Zwemer, a co-founder of the Arabian Mission and a prolific writer who became the moving spirit of the world Protestant missionary work in the first three decades of the twentieth century. This story of S.M. Zwemer and the Arabian Mission has been placed within the context of intellectual ferment which American Protestantism experienced at the turn of the twentieth century and which concerned the missionary work in general and among Muslims in particular. This ferment can be traced in various writings and in the documents of the three missionary conferences in Cairo, Lucknow and Edinburg in 1906, 1910 and 1911. Intensive discussions, research, debates, controversies and new approaches to Islam and Muslim became the foundation of the further perception of interreligious relations and finally placed many churches and their missions between religious pluralism and the obligations of the Great Commission.

The *Arabian Mission* was launched in 1889. Adopted by the Reformed Church in America in 1894, it was formally dissolved in 1973. The Mission operated in five main locations: Basrah, Amarah, Bahrein, Kuwait and Muscat. It was only one of many sent to non-Christian countries by American churches but at the same time it was unique because of the ideas of J. G. Lansing, who was its founder and deliberately dedicated the Mission to “direct Muslim evangelism.”

At the turn of the twentieth century, American interest in foreign missions increased dramatically. By 1915 over three million women swelled the roll of women’s missionary agencies and auxiliaries.<sup>1</sup> The missionary movement drew its culturally affirmative mode upon the

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman’s Foreign Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870–1920*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 3.

biblical ideas and metaphors with a sense of “ourselves as a chosen people” behind mission activity not between 1860s and 1900, the understanding of evangelization changed, encompassing both evangelism and the “civilizing” functions of missions. The idea of new mission duties emerged along with the rapid advance of Western economic, political, and cultural expansion into the non-Western world<sup>2</sup>. We can hardly imagine history of any region, including the Middle East, and especially the social history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries without Christian missionaries. American Christian missionaries – Catholic and Protestant – were running schools, hospitals, and other institutions that endure in some forms today. They were trying to implement American patterns of management and concepts of social organization in the local societies.<sup>3</sup> The role they played in the civilizational development of the Middle East has still been discussed and viewed as a very important one.<sup>4</sup>

The institution that initiated the missionary movement and played a critical role in shaping the idea of approaching other cultures and religions was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In 1808 five fellow students of the William Colle in Williamston, Massachusetts, went on to organize a secret society named the “Brethren,” to promote the idea of foreign missions. At that time, American Protestants were engaged in home missions and considered foreign mission work impractical. It was Samuel Mills who promoted the cause of sending gospel to non-Christians. In 1810, Mills transferred the Brethren society to Andover

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<sup>2</sup> Various studies analyzed the ideological orientation of the American missionaries and their view of the Western civilization as the dominant force in the modern world. For the review of these studies see L. Ventura, “History, Religion, and Progress; The View of the “Modernity” of the American Protestant Missionaries in Late Ottoman Syria,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2014, pp. 442–56.

<sup>3</sup> High School Alhors in Tehran founded by the *misyooner* can serve as an example to this endurance.

<sup>4</sup> H.J. Sharkey, in *Introduction to American Missionaries and the Middle East* stresses that: “Scholars still need to explore two broad avenues that lead through the history of American missionary encounters in the Middle East. The first avenue goes by examining the activities of American organizations that sent missions to the Middle East. The second avenue considers the local consequences of, and responses to, missionary encounters by using local sources. There is a need to take both approaches.” – M. A. Doğan and H. J. Sharkey (eds.), *American Missionaries and the Middle East. Foundational Encounters*, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2011), xxviii. However, there are studies that completely ignored this topic, see: P.J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); N. R. Keddie, *Modern Iran. Roots and Results of Revolution*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

Theological Seminary and on June 27, the same year, he and some Congregational leaders structured a foreign missionary society called The Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Its members declared to devote their lives to missionary world with non-Christian in foreign lands. On September 5, 1810, the name was changed for The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM).<sup>5</sup>

Missionary work in the Arab world differed, however, from the missionary activities in other regions. The Arab Middle East was a part of the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman authorities forbade direct evangelism among Muslims by foreign nationals. Nevertheless, they could preach the gospel to Ottoman citizens who were Christians.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, western Protestant missionary effort in the Arab world was focused upon the ancient Christian population in the Arab lands and followed the idea of “indirect evangelism” of Muslims “through reviving an indigenous Christian witness.”<sup>7</sup> This was determined mainly by choice as out of necessity but there was another aspect of such a strategy. Some pointed out at the obstinacy of Muslims in rejecting the Christian message and those who converted from Islam to Christianity. Western scholarly circles accepted the idea that “Islam was a corrupt and demeaning religion which diverted its followers from the path of true salvation and stood in the path of human progress generally.” There was an opinion that Islam as a religion should be left for the perdition.<sup>8</sup>

John G. Lansing, the founder of the Arabian Mission did not agree with this way of thinking and exposed arguments to prove that spiritual awakening of the Islamic world was on the way and that “the greatest marvels of missionary work ever witnesses are yet to be witnessed in Arabian territory and the ranks of Islam.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, he deliberately changed the focus of missionary work and dedicated the Arabian Mission to “direct

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<sup>5</sup> See D. K. Showalter, “The 1810 Formation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,” in C. Putney and P. T. Burlin (eds.), *The Role of the American Board in the World. Bicentennial Reflections on the Organization’s Missionary Work, 1810–2010*, (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF and STOCK, 2012), 1–10.

<sup>6</sup> A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800–1901*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 29.

<sup>7</sup> A. Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East*, (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), 165.

<sup>8</sup> See L.R. Scudder III, *The Arabian Mission’s Story. In search of Abraham’s Other Son*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 143.

<sup>9</sup> J.G. Lansing, “Appendix: The Origin and Plan of the Arabian Mission,” in S.M. Zwemer, and J. Cantine, *The Golden Milestone: Reminiscences of Pioneer days Fifty Years Ago in Arabia*, (New York: Fleming H. Revel, 1938), 148, 153.

Muslim evangelism.” This plan, although viewed as “audacious if not foolhardy by more experienced missionaries,”<sup>10</sup> made the Arabian Mission unique on the map of American Protestant mission in the Arab world.

The activity of the Arabian Mission took place in particular period of the history of the region and in particular time of the history of the Church and missionary movement. L.R. Scudder III called the mission “a late blooming flower of what has been called The Modern Missionary movement.”<sup>11</sup> As a matter of fact, the wider context of the missionary work determined to a great extent the decision of a few young graduates from New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Jersey to go abroad in the 1880s and preach the gospel in the sands of the Arabian Peninsula. Between 1880 and 1918 the theology and missiology of the American Protestantism experienced intensive discussions aimed at shaping the theory and practice of missionary work. These ideas influenced individual missionaries and provided them with the vision about land and people to whom they were sent. This monograph aims at discussing intellectual roots of the Arabian Mission by referring to theological and political discourse on Islam, non-Western cultures, and attitude to indigenous people that was going on at that time.

James W. Van Hoesen, the editor of *Word and World: Reformed Theology in America* has stressed that “Christian theology exists in the context of history. This means that Christian theology is necessarily dynamics and developing, is shaped in each new age by the interaction of the biblical Word with the contemporary world ...”<sup>12</sup> Paraphrasing these words we can admit that Christian missionary history has existed in the context of culture. Missionary history has been considered for a long time as a prime site exclusively for the study about Western missionaries. But since some time ago this history has become a primary source for the study of local histories and especially cross-cultural and interreligious relations. An interesting remark on this shift can be found in the book of William R. Hutchison *Errand to the World. American Protestant Thought and Foreign Mission*. Hutchison, an American historian, has confessed that having his parents who spent several years as educational missionaries in Iran, and his wife’s parents who served for many years with the YMCA in Cairo, he had paid little attention to the subject of the history of foreign missions as a part of America–East Asian relations. He highlights that:

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<sup>10</sup> Scudder III, 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> J.W. Van Hoesen, “Preface,” in J.W. Van Hoesen (ed.), *Word and World: Reformed Theology in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), xi.

“The foreign mission enterprise in its heyday (about 1880–1930) was a massive affair, involving tens of thousands of Americans abroad and millions at home. Even in the early nineteenth century, as a movement of huge aspiration but more modest dimensions, it exceeded most other reform or benevolent organizations in size and resources.” In spite of this fact, missionaries have on the whole remained “shadowy figures” in narrations of religious and general history, and Hutchison discusses reasons for such neglect. He is of the opinion, that “these overseas Americans and their best-known objectives have seemed more than a little embarrassing, and especially so to those who might have struck some balance between appreciation and criticism; that is, to those engaged in the study of religion.” The purposes of missionaries determined generally demeaning attitude toward religions that were considered by the recipient peoples as integral to their won cultures, and the most common reaction to such complexity was simple avoidance.<sup>13</sup>

The missionary movement has been exposed in many studies as an important facet of intercultural relations. Ernest R. May and James C. Thompson, in their introduction to a series on American–East Asian relations stated that: “Missionaries formed the principal channel for a two-way process of cultural influence between East and West.”<sup>14</sup> Initially studies on the missionary activity were mostly concerned with the missionaries’ role in the preaching of the gospel. However, the missionaries, “particularly the pioneer missionaries in any country, often played a wider role than just preaching the gospel. If it be true that first impressions are often lasting ones, the initial encounter between the missionaries and their new country of vocation was significant.”<sup>15</sup> They have been recognized as “the most pervasive expression of America’s nineteenth century sense of mission, contributing to mutually favorable relations between the country in which they served and America.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> W.R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World. American Protestant Thought and Foreign Mission*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), xi, 1–2. In 1820s the income of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions ranged around 40,000 dollars a year and it was 3 times bigger than the second organization on the list in terms of income.

<sup>14</sup> E.R. May, J.C. Thompson Jr. (eds.), *American–East Asian Relations: A Survey*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 16.

<sup>15</sup> E.N. Hunt, Jr., *Protestant Pioneers in Korea*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 1.

<sup>16</sup> R. Anderson, *To Advance, the Gospel. Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson edited with an introduction by R. Pierce Beaver*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967).

In terms of this general remark, Protestant presence in Korea may be considered as impressive. This country has been referred to as the success story in modern missions. Friendly relations between Korea and America were evident from their beginning in 1882. American Methodists and Presbyterians began schools, dispensaries, and hospitals. In 1888 there was twenty baptized converts but in 1889 the number of Presbyterian converts increased till a hundred. An explanation for the “success” of Protestant beginnings in Korea has become cliché and most commonly there was the use of the so-called Nevius method and the response of the Koreans. John L. Nevius, a missionary to China, propose to start a systematic Bible study program on three level – local church, provincial, and national. The mission began conducting training sessions for Korean Christian leaders from various areas of the peninsula. The sessions emphasized basic doctrines of Christianity and started a theological class for Korean converts. But the most important was the friendly response of the Koreans. The king of Koreans recognized that “Protestant Christianity was an integral part of American life and thus desirable for Koreans as it sought to build stronger relations with America. The king also was anxious to provide significant help for his people suffering from epidemics of unknown ills. Initially Christianity was accepted more for what it was perceived to be nationally and pragmatically than anything inherent in Christianity. People were being treated for their ills, provided with new educational opportunity, and some were being converted.”<sup>17</sup>

Historical studies on Christian missions working with peoples of other religions and cultures are abundant and occupy an important place in humanities. They have emphasized issues of great theoretical importance and topical interest: theories of empire and imperial expansion; racialism; the rise of new elites; the foundations of nationalism. David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson admit, that “Missionary history ... is coming to be recognized as a primary site, rich in source materials, for the study of cross-cultural religious interactions – rather than largely being for, and about Western missionaries, as it was in the past. Nevertheless, there remain in our view some serious conceptual roadblocks to the study of such interactions. ... These stem in no small part from the lingering associations of missionaries with colonialism and its legacies – associations still capable of generating considerable heat. Thus, historians can point to many examples where missionaries worked at cross-purposes from colonial officials, but such dissonances were not always apparent to

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<sup>17</sup> Hunt, 3, 77.

the indigenous peoples, who were likely to view missionaries and colonial officials as part of the same wave.”<sup>18</sup>

The associations of missionaries with colonialism and its legacies still generates discussions, and “cultural imperialism” influenced tremendously the representation of the missionary movement. This term was coined in the 1970s to indicate the alleged global dominance of American mass culture, and first of all, the Hollywood’s production.<sup>19</sup> Later on, it was also used in academic writing with reference to the relationship between the West and the so-called Orient, and the book *Orientalism* of Edward Said (1935–2003) became the most influential in the development of this line of argumentation. Said concluded that the nineteenth-century Western scholars and novelist were not epistemologically neutral in their research and imputed a set of negative attributes to non-Western society, constructing in such a way concepts of “Self” and “Other” as completely opposite entities, and thus, contributed to the extension of colonial power.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, the whole system of modern knowledge lost neutrality and the transformation of the world has started to be perceived within a coercive process and the power and dominance structures.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, the concept of “cultural imperialism” has been applied to Christian missions in the age of colonialism and to any intercultural exchange between Western and Eastern societies that were facilitated or provoked by missionaries working in the field. Missionary were “routinely portrayed in both literature and scholarship as narrow-minded chauvinists whose presence and preaching destroyed indigenous cultures and opened the way for the extension of colonial rule.”<sup>22</sup>

Heather J. Sharkey put new critical questions concerning wider context of American presence in the Middle East. She has referred to an interview of Edward Said made before September 11, 2001 who marked that the United States had had no direct experience of military intervention in the

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<sup>18</sup> D. Lindenfeld and M. Richardson, “Introduction. Beyond Conversion and Syncretism,” in D. Lindenfeld and M. Richardson (eds.), *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism. Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800–2000*, (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1–2.

<sup>19</sup> See E.G. McAnany and K.T. Wilkinson, “From Cultural Imperialists to Takeover Victims? Questions on Hollywood’s Buyouts from the Critical Tradition,” *Communication Research* 19, no. 6 (1992), 724–48.

<sup>20</sup> See E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978); idem, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> See R. Dunch, “Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity,” *History and Theory* 41 (October 2002), 303.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 307

Middle East and to the fact, that following the U.S. invasion on Iraq in 2003, the conclusion of Said sounded as too soon. Sharkey has asked, in particularly, “Have American overtures been altruistic or imperialistic?” Proving that Christian missionaries participated significantly in America’s “foundational encounters” with the Middle East and its people beginning in the early nineteenth century, she has also asked: “And how did encounters transform the parties involved?”<sup>23</sup>

Traditional ways of writing about missionary history often lacked nuances, especially where they were taken by scholars with strongly religious or secular points of view. Religious scholars tended to be hagiographic in their coverage of missionaries, while secular scholars often treated evangelists in a dismissive manner. This second approach has been represented by anthropology which has perceived the missionary expansion of the nineteenth century as a part of the white man’s penetration into African and Asiatic countries. Referring to the history of Africa, Melville J. Herskovits pointed out that: “There is perhaps no aspect of the African experience that has been analyzed with less objectivity than the Christian missionary effort.”<sup>24</sup> In 1944, G. Gordon Brown designed a psychological portrait of a missionary underlining that a missionary is a member of his society, characterized by the culture of his society and differing only from other members of his society by emphases on particular aspects of his culture. “He dresses in a certain way, he believes in monogamy, he believes in abstract justice (i.e., Euro-American legal concepts and procedures), he is a member of an economic system which he believes works (with some modifications to allow for the confusion of economic thought in his homeland), and he observes certain rituals centering around eating, the taboo on the human body, and the observance of a system of sexual restraints.”<sup>25</sup>

Anthropology has proposed a promising method of research which was adopted by the so-called revisionists missiologists who, rather than constantly praising or belittling missionaries, ‘complicate’ their subject, demonstrating that missionaries were a diverse group of individuals with different methods and aspirations. As a result, new studies of Christian missions to the Middle East came out and they were based on documents and personal narrations such as, for example: *The Role of the American Board in the World. Bicentennial Reflections on the Organization’s Missionary Work, 1810-2010*, ed. by Clifford Putney and Paul T. Burlin;

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<sup>23</sup> Sharkey, “Introduction”, ix–xliii.

<sup>24</sup> M.J. Herskovits, *The Human Factor in Changing Africa*, (New York, 1962), 204.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, 214.



*American Christian and Islam. Evangelical Culture and Muslims from Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* by Thomas S. Kidd; *American Evangelicals in Egypt. Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* of Heather J. Sharkey; and *American Missionaries and the Middle East. Foundational Encounters*, edited by Mehmet Ali Doğan and Heather J. Sharkey.<sup>26</sup>

The main theoretical assumption of these studies stresses that any cultural encounter has an impact on the side that is influenced by another side but the impact is reciprocal. In the case of the missionaries they “may have assumed that they were delivering a message in a one-way stream of transmission, but close study of their history shows that missionaries and missions came out transformed by their encounters.”<sup>27</sup> Heather J. Sharkey points out that, “Missionaries often revised their activities and goals in light of what Middle Eastern peoples sought or demanded. In many cases ... mission schools became increasingly ‘secular’ insofar as they minimized their explicitly Christian or evangelical dimensions in order to appease or reassure governments, religious authorities, and families, and thereby to bolster enrollments.”<sup>28</sup>

American missionaries arriving to a non-Christian region had particular views of this region, its religion, and people. These views became a critical starting point of cultural encounters. Thomas S. Kidd, in his book *American Christian and Islam. Evangelical Culture and Muslims from Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*, is focused on America’s views on Islam and the roots of Christian hostility to Islam, especially the hostility of the American Christians. The Muslim-Christian relations, especially Christian assessments of Islam and the identity of the Muslim community has always surprised Christians. The Qur’an links itself to the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels but at the same time it was critical about Jews and Christians. Kidd refers to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and to the problem that the Western knowledge on Islam was biased because of the Western imperial politics. But the question of the Western epistemological neutrality goes far beyond politics. It reflects the mechanism of an intercultural encounter and combines various aspects, including concept of otherness, consciousness of self, psychological consequences of approaching

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<sup>26</sup> Putney and Burlin; T.S. Kidd, *American Christian and Islam. Evangelical Culture and Muslims from Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); H. J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt. Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Doğan and Sharkey.

<sup>27</sup> Sharkey, in “Introduction” to Doğan and Sharkey, xxi.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

another culture. Nevertheless, the idea that “Islam poses a unique threat out of all the world religions” and then Muslims “would either have to be converted or defeated ... persistently appeared in American Christian writing about Islam.”<sup>29</sup>

This monograph tries to contribute to the discussion on intercultural encounters by referring to the history of the Arabian Mission situated within the broader context of the disputes about missionary work and within the process of acculturation which designates “the transfer of cultural elements from one social group of people to another,” or “to cause or induce a people to adopt the culture of another.”<sup>30</sup> “Acculturation”, proposed as a concept by Melville J. Herskovits in the 1930s, has been developed in the following decades. Particularly, G. Linwood Barney has introduced the idea of “inculturation” to indicate the phenomenon of searching for and introducing to “culture” of what he has defined as “supracultural.” The starting point of the Barney’s concept of “supracultural” was the assumption that God is creator, and humankind is creature. “Human beings make culture howbe-in with God-given capabilities. ... In self-centeredness, all humanity has alienated itself from God and produced culture that reflects that alienation in a self-centered perspective and selfish concerns.” However, human beings cultural experience has been affected by the dynamic activity of God and “it is difficult to distinguish between that which in essence is determined by God’s activity (supracultural) and that which is a believer’s response (cultural).” Nevertheless, any society’s self-oriented culture “will have to be modified (transformed) and reoriented to reflect the supracultural with its divine source” and it can be assumed that missionaries should play significant role in this transformation. Barney, however, did not consider that such transformation should be the imposition of cultural norms of one society upon another. He perceived this process as a sequence of changes consistent with the character of the supracultural.<sup>31</sup>

Barney also exposes “outsider” and “insider point” of view on culture as another concept important for missionary work. He refers to the book *Modern Mission and Culture: Their Mutual Relations* (1879) of Gustav Warneck, who was one the first missiologist aware of the reciprocal implications between mission and culture. Warneck made a distinction between outsider and insider points of view on a particular culture. He

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<sup>29</sup> Kidd, xii.

<sup>30</sup> See M.J. Herskovits, *Acculturation. The Study of Cultural Contact*, (New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1938), 2.

<sup>31</sup> G.L. Barney, “The Challenge of Anthropology to Current Missiology,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October 1981, 174.

spoke of culture as being in itself a neutral concept but exposed to interpretations by those who were sharing its values as insiders. A missionary, as an outsider in the process of contacting the alien culture, should search for “supracultural” components or signs of God’s activity in the process of cultural development and cultural evolution, and such a search is, in fact, the process of crossing cultural borders. Barney appealed for taking culture more seriously in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics and considered that a missionary “should be able to approximate more closely the insider’s point of view in the varied times and cultural contexts of the Scriptures.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea of this study is to show that the search for “supracultural” components of Islamic culture led to the new visions of Islam and missionary work by the end of the 1890–1918 period. These visions shaped the American Protestant missionary movement in the land of Islam in the next decades. Preaching the gospel and converting non-Christian into Christianity has always been a primary duty of any Christian church. But the question of how to reach a non-believer and how to convince him or her to accept the gospel has always remained opened. Individual missionaries, who served in the field, were sent by particular institutions with special goals, objectives, and concepts and the activity of their missions was determined by home churches and their concept of work among non-Christian people to a great extent. But when working with indigenous population they were exposed to acculturation. They “may have assumed that they were delivering a message in a one-way stream of transmission, but close study of their history shows that missionaries and missions came out transformed by their encounters.”<sup>33</sup>

In case of the Arabian Mission, the work in the field resulted in new accents in the mission’s strategy. Within the period of 1889–1973 hundreds of people were involved in the Mission’s activity in the Gulf. Dorothy Van Ess, the author of the history of the Mission till 1957, listed 91 names of missionaries, doctors and teachers who spent many years in the region, and 11 nurses on short term basis, as well as 10 teachers.<sup>34</sup> Samuel M. Zwemer, James Cantine were key persons at the formative time. George Stone, James T. Wyckoff, Clarence E. Riggs, Peter Zwemer, Elizabeth G. De Pree, who married J. Cantine, Amy Elizabeth Wilkes, who married S.M. Zwemer, John and Dorothy Van Ess, Sharon and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> D. Van Ess, *History of the Arabian Mission, 1926–1957*, Appendixes, 1–11. Theil Research Center, Joint Archives of Holland. A.C. Van Raalte Institute, Holland, MI (furthermore as Joint Archives of Holland).

Marion Wells Thoms, Harry Wiersum, Lankford and Emma Worall, Gerrit J. and Gertrud Pennings, Arthur K. Bennett and Christine Iverson Bennett were among the first as well as James E. Moerdyk, Edwin and Eleanor Calverley, Sarah L. Hosmon, Frank Scudder, Frederick (Fred) J. Barny and his wife Margaret Rice, Paul and Regina Harrison, Henry A. Bilkert, Harold Storm, C. Stanley G. Mylrea, Gerrit D. and Josephine E. Van Peurse, Mary N. Tiffany, Cornelia Dalenberg, Donald MacNeil, Dirk and Minnie Dykstra, Rose and Gerald Nykerk, Lew and Dorothy Scudder, Jeanette Boersma, W. Wells Thoms and his wife Ethel T. Scudder, and Maurice and Eleanor Heusinkveld. The new generation of missionaries is still active in the Gulf carrying on the Al Amanah Centre in Muscat.<sup>35</sup> The field work resulted in multitude encounters with indigenous people, Muslims in the majority cases.

The title of this book refers to the inscription on a grave at the Christian cemetery in Kuwait City where a man known as Abdul Messiah<sup>36</sup> was buried. He was one of a few local Muslims who was converted from Islam to Christianity by the Arabian Mission, an American Protestant organization operated in the Persian Gulf and southern Iraq. Abdul Messiah was born a Muslim but converted to Christianity and adopted a new name which meant Servant of Christ. He came to the American missionaries in Muscat in 1903. He was in this town on business for the Sheikh of Kuwait. He came to the Mission with the purpose of asking about the truth. He explained that he tried to find the truth in the teachings of Sunni, Shia, Wahhabi and Babi, but he failed. He visited all of the principal Islamic shrines and the shrine of the Babis to get peace but he failed, and finally read books on the Christians, and some parts of the Bible, and felt that the Christians had the truth to give him. Since then he continued to study his Bible and did not fear to confess that he was a Christian. He refused the offers of his relatives to pay all his indebtedness if he would only come back to his previous religion. In 1910, Abdul Messiah fell sick and died. He was buried on the Christian cemetery in Kuwait and his grave bore the inscription: *Here lies Abdul Mesiah, whose life and death testify to the power of God's grace to save sinner, even Moslems.* This inscription reflects determination showed by the missionaries in their everyday activity to achieve their goal.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For the list of missionaries involved in the work of five stations in Basrah, Amarah, Kuwait, Bahrein and Muscat see Scudder III (Appendix).

<sup>36</sup> The spelling of Arab proper names in this study conform to that used in the Missionary literature.

<sup>37</sup> *Neglected Arabia. Missionary News and Letters.* Published quarterly by the Arabian Mission, no. 72, January–March, 1910, 11.

Many missionaries and scholars contributed to the studies on the history of the Arabian Mission in a wider context of the Christian missionary movement. *Mission to Muslims: The Record* (1977) of Lyle Vander Werff is focused on Reformed and Anglican efforts in proclamation and presence in the Islamic world since 1800. A Presbyterian approach to interreligious dialogue is presented in *Christian and Muslims Together* by Byron L. Haines and Frank L. Cooley (1987). The following books provide insights on evangelization and dialogue: *The Christian Approach to the Muslim* (1964) by G.E. Morrison; *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (1980) by Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq; *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (1980) of Phil Parshall; *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (1989) of Douglas Woodberry (ed.), and *Faith Meets Faith* (1981) by Gerald Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (eds.). A valuable publication of Heleen Murre-van den Berg is *The Study of Western Missions in the Middle East 1820–1920: An Annotated Bibliography* focused on Roman Catholic and Protestant missions.<sup>38</sup> *In God's Empire. French Missionaries and the Modern World* edited by Owen White and J.P. Daughton places French missionaries in the modern world and evaluates the role missionaries played in modern French history.<sup>39</sup> Angelyn Dries book *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* discusses the American Catholic Mission History since the colonial period until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup>

The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America should be considered of primary importance, and especially: J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam* (1952); Herman Harmelink III, *Ecumenism and the Reformed Church* (1968); James W. Van Hoeven, ed., *Word and World: Reformed Theology in America* (1986); Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (1983); Elton J. Bruins, *The Americanization of a Congregation* (1996); Renée House and John Coakley (eds.), *Patterns and Portraits: Women in the History of the Reformed Church in America* (1999); Russell L. Gasero, *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America, 1628–2000* (2001).

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<sup>38</sup> H. Murre-van den Berg, “The Study of Western Missions in the Middle East (1820–1920: An Annotated Bibliography,” in N. Friedrich, U. Kaminsky, R. Löffler (eds.), *The Social Dimension of Christian Missions in the Middle East. Historical Studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 35–54.

<sup>39</sup> O. White and J.P. Daughton (eds.), *In God's Empire. French Missionaries and the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> A. Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History*, (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1998).

The role of women in the Arabian Mission can be evaluated as critical. They were wives and mothers but also physicians, teacher, nurses, helpers and colporteurs. Some of them published their books that reflect the personal experience and contain valuable information about social history of the region. The following should be listed: Dorothy Van Ess, *Pioneers in the Arab World* (1974); Cornelia Dalenberg with David DeGroot, *Sharifa* (1983); Jeanette Boersma with David DeGroot, *Grace in the Gulf* (1991)<sup>41</sup>.

History of the Mission has been exposed in several publications prepared by the missionaries themselves. In 1926, A. De Witt Mason and F. J. Barny published *History of the Arabian Mission*. Between 1945 and 1951 C. Stanley G. Mylrea prepared the text *Kuwait Before Oil: Memoirs of Dr. C. Stanley G. Mylrea, Pioneer Medical Missionary of the Arabian Mission*. Dorothy Van Ess manuscript was prepared in 1957 and entitled *History of the Arabian Mission 1926–1957*. Doctor Thesis of Abdul Malek Al-Tameemi entitled *The Arabian Mission: A case Study of Christian Missionary Work in the Arabian Gulf* and prepared at University of Durham in 1977 should be mentioned, as well.

The works of Samuel M. Zwemer, a prolific writer who had written or edited forty-nine books, in addition to his editorial work and many articles for the *Moslem World* represent a unique source of knowledge about the religious tendencies within American Protestant Home Churches and as well as about the everyday activity of missionaries in the field.<sup>42</sup>

As a separate source the book *The Arabian Mission's Story. In Search of Abraham's Other Son* (1998) should be considered. This the most informative book on the Arabian Mission was written by Lewis R. Scudder III, who himself was born to Reformed Church in America missionary parents in Kuwait. The book contains "Arabian Mission Time Line", an encyclopedic chapter that shapes significant developments of the Reformed Church and the Arabian Mission. This distinction between "church" and "mission" has made by the author isolates events which

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<sup>41</sup> See P. Tuson, *Playing the Game: Western Women in Arabia*, (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> See: Bibliography. The classical biography of S.M. Zwemer is the book of J. Christy Wilson, *Apostle to Islam: A Biography of Samuel M. Zwemer*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1952). The new book on Zwemer was published in 2013 – see J. Bengé and G. Bengé, *Samuel Zwemer. The Burden of Arabia*, (Seattle: YWAM Publishing).

“specifically aimed at developing the Muslim-Christian encounter on ground other than political or military.”<sup>43</sup>

In 2008, the book *Before Oil. Memories of an American Missionary Family in the Persian Gulf, 1910–1939* was published by Timothy S. Harrison whose father Dr. Paul Harrison spent forty years as a medical missionary of the Reformed Church in America in Bahrein, Kuwait and Oman. The book of T.S. Harrison, who grew up in the Persian Gulf in the 1930s, covers almost thirty years of the Arabian Mission activity.

The latest publication is *Seeds of Hope, Seeds of Hates: A Love Story (Begins)* by Professor Donald Luiden of the Hope College faculty based on letters and articles written by his parents – Edwin M. and Ruth S. Luidens – who served as missionaries in Iraq, India and Lebanon. This monograph focuses on the years 1943–6 and also reflects personal experience of the author who was born in Bahrein and shared life with his parents.<sup>44</sup>

Myself, I was privileged to spent several months in 1995 at the Gardner A. Sage Library of New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick (NJ) when I was a Senior Fulbright Scholar affiliated at the Rutgers University. I am much obliged to Russell Gasero, the archivist and a sensitive expert, for introducing me to the archival material of the Arabian Mission and for his the most valuable assistance in my study on the Mission at that time and as well as in 2016 when I resumed my interest to the Mission and completed this project. The holdings of the Archives the Reformed Church in America date from the 1630s with historical correspondence between the New Netherlands churches and the Classis of Amsterdam, as well as with present-era records from RCA bodies and congregations and the RCA’s many missions. My research at the Gardner A. Sage Library was focused on the general history of the RCA and on the

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<sup>43</sup> Lewis R. Scudder III was born in 1941 to RCA missionary parents in Kuwait. His father, a physician, served in Kuwait from 1939 until he died in 1975. His mother, Dorothy, a medical administrator and nurse, served until she died in 1991. After receiving an M.Div. from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, he was ordained by the Classis of Holland. From 1967 to 1973 Scudder served in Lebanon, and then until 1976 he served as pastor of the English Language Congregation of the National Evangelical Church in Kuwait. In 1980 Scudder became the first Liaison Officer in the Gulf for the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and was based in Bahrein. His mandate was to help the expatriate churches of the region establish lines of communication with each other and between themselves and local society – see Editor’s “Preface” by D. J. Bruggink, in Scudder III, xi–xii).

<sup>44</sup> D. A. Luidens, *Seeds of Hope, Seeds of Hate: A Love Story (Begins)*, (Holland, MI: The Van Raalte Press, 2016).

archival collection Arabia Mission, 753, Correspondence, that contains the records from 1890 till 1947 on the missionaries' activity in Bahrein, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman, and especially correspondence between the missionaries and the Board of Foreign Mission of the Reformed Church in America represented by its President Rev. Henry E. Cobb and Corresponding Secretary Rev. W.I. Chamberlain.

I also researched the publications of the Arabian Mission, in particular 250 issues of *The Arabian Mission Newsletters* which spans the years 1892–1962 and were published under four following names throughout its run: *Field Report* (nos. 1–26, 1892–1898), *Quarterly Letters* (nos. 27–40, 1898–1901), *Neglected Arabia* (nos. 41–215, 1902–49), and *Arabia Calling* (nos. 216–50, 1949–62).

In 2015, I visited the Joint Archives of Holland in the A.C. Van Raalte Institute in Theil Research Center in Holland (MI) and thanks to Director Geoffrey Reynolds I had an opportunity of researching the archival collections of Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, including personal papers from faculty and staff of the College as well as from missionaries of the Seminary. I had a privilege of meeting outstanding scholars of the A.C. Van Raalte Institute, and among them Dr. Donald Bruggink, General Editor at Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, and Professors Sander de Haan, Robert P. Swierenga and Donald A. Luidens. I would like to express my gratitude to them for all suggestions concerning my project, and especially for *No drum or no baptism* story of Donald A. Luidens on an old African woman from Bahrein, a Christian convert. This story encompasses major topics of this book, in particular relations between religion and culture, attitude of missionaries to local non-Christian culture people, and the topic of conversion as a possible outcome of cultural encounter. I also thank the staff of Van Wylen Library of Hope College for the most valuable assistance.

Additional archival research was made in February 2016 at the Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and in April 2017 at the Houghton Library, where the records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are kept. I am very grateful for the most helpful assistance to Director Beth Bidlack, to Betty Bolden and Matthew Baker from the Burke Library, and to Director Susan Halpert and Joseph Zajac from the Houghton Library.

Adam Simnowitz from Dearborn (MI) was so kind and helpful when sharing with me his impressive knowledge about Samuel M. Zwemer life and publications. The Adam's collection of the Arabian Mission's



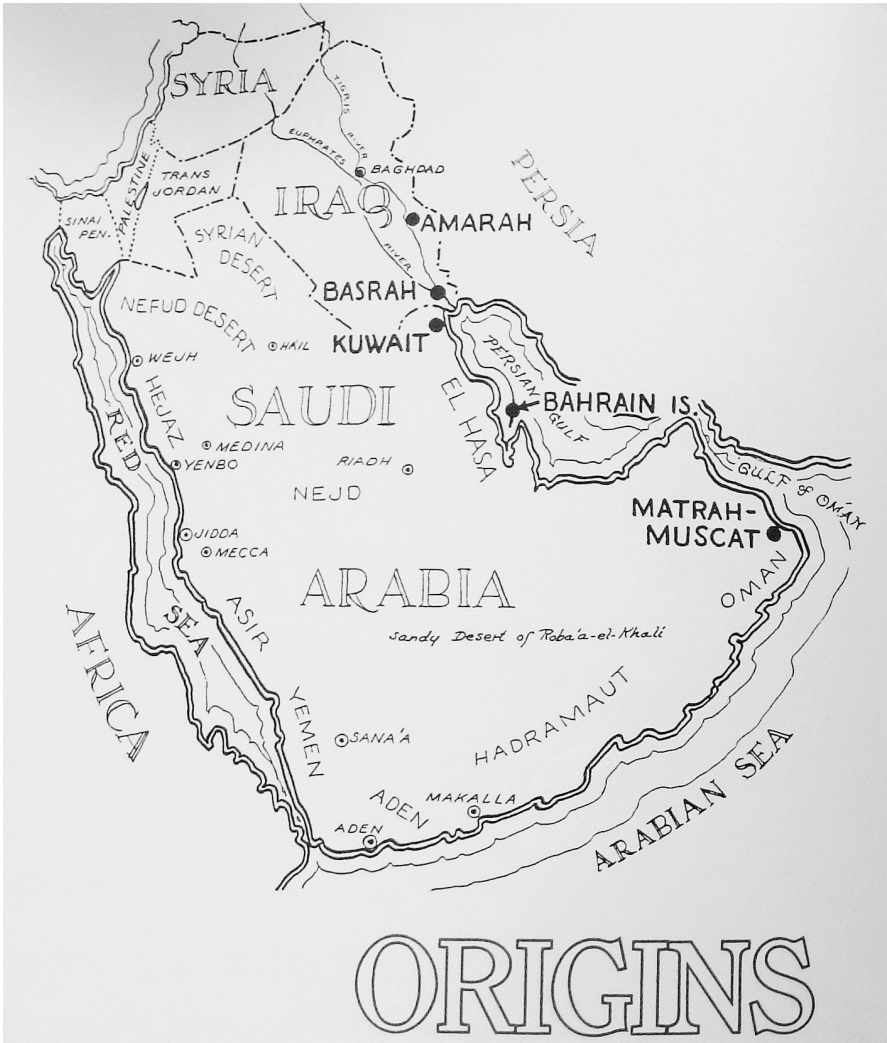
documentary records proved to be very useful in preparing the final version of the text and I am very grateful for this. I also used Adam's collection of the thirty-seven issues of *The Moslem World* (published in 1911–46), a quarterly founded and edited by Samuel M. Zwemer with the aim “to interpret Islam as a world-wide religion in all its varied aspects and its deep needs, ethical and spiritual.”<sup>45</sup> Till 2017, one hundred seven volumes have been published by the Hartford Theological Seminary of Connecticut.

My visits to Al Amanah Center in Muscat in 2015 and in 2016, however short, was extremely interesting and memorable. Thanks to Rev. Justine Meyers I managed to visit the mansion and the chapel established and used now by the Center as a successor of the Arabian Mission. It was established in 1987 by the Reformed Church in partnership with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of Oma and operates as a social service center carrying on interfaith programs.

The preliminary results of my research were presented in February 2016 at The Department of Religion of Princeton University and at The Reformed Church Center at New Brunswick Theological Seminary in New Brunswick (NJ). I would like to thank Professor Shaun Marmon from Princeton, and Rev. James Brumm and Professor John Coakley from New Brunswick for the unique opportunity of listening to their comments.

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<sup>45</sup> S.M. Zwemer, “Editorial,” *The Moslem World*, Vol. 1, January, 1911, no. 1, 3.



# CHAPTER ONE

## PROTESTANT MILLENNIALISM AND MISSIONS

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, American interest in foreign missions increased dramatically. In 1886, at a summer Bible conference for leaders of the collegiate Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), one hundred young men decided to become foreign missionaries. This was the beginning of the widespread student enthusiasm for missions, with its watchword "the evangelization of the world in this generation," as the archetypal symbol of the American missionary movement.

### 1. Enthusiasm for missions

The watchword "the evangelization of the world in this generation" was coined by John Raleigh Mott (1865–1955), a Methodist layperson and a long-serving leader of YMCA, and later on the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches which was formed in 1948.<sup>46</sup> The slogan gained in brief time a "powerful hold on the minds of the future leaders of thought and revolutionized American missionary movement."<sup>47</sup> Within thirty years after the YMCA conference, the United States displaced the United Kingdom as the leader in missionary work.

Mott understood "evangelization" as "an adequate opportunity given to all men to know Jesus Christ and become His real disciples." He believed that the Jesus' words "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Matthew, xxviii, 19) was commanded to all Christians not to the Apostles only. Mott referred to the Greek etymology in defining the meaning of "preaching the Gospel." He admitted that besides "to converse", it could also have meant "to proclaim", "to herald," or "to

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<sup>46</sup> J. R. Mott, *The Evangelization of the World in this Generation*, (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1900), 2.

<sup>47</sup> D.L. Robert, *Occupy Until I come. A.T. Pierson and the Evangelization of the World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Oxford, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), vii.

transmit good news.”<sup>48</sup> Mott believed that if preaching was faithful, it “must be followed by the baptism of converts, by their organization into churches, by building them up in knowledge, faith and character, and by enlisting and training them for service.”<sup>49</sup>

Specific techniques of preaching can also be found in Mott’s work. “The Gospel must be preached in such a manner as will constitute an intelligent and intelligible presentation of the message. This necessitates on the part of the preacher such a knowledge of the language, the habits of thought and the moral condition of those who are to be evangelized as will enable them to understand what is said.” Mott thought that, “Education work sustains a vital relation to that of evangelization.” It undermined “heathen superstitions and false system of belief, thus facilitating the work of preaching the Gospel by removing false ideas which already had possession of mind.” He stressed that in some parts of the world “more people have been led to accept Christ though educational missionary effort than through any other agency.” The example was Western India, and Egypt and Japan. Medical work also constituted a necessary factor in evangelizing the world. “It affords access to all classes of people, the highest as well as the lowest. It disarms hostility and breaks down prejudices and barriers, thus making possible the preaching of the Gospel in communities otherwise inaccessible”<sup>50</sup> – we read in *The Evangelization of the World in this Generation*.

Mott was of the opinion that the missionaries who were sent to evangelize the world should be of the highest qualifications. “The success of the undertaking depends even more upon the quality of the workers than upon their number.” But the most important was the meaning of “in this generation,” We read, “If the Gospel is to be preached to all men it obviously must be done while they are living. The evangelization of the world in this generation, therefore, means the preaching of the Gospel to those who are now living. To us who are responsible for preaching the Gospel it means in our life-time. /.../ The phrase ‘in this generation,’ therefore, strictly speaking has a different meaning for each person.” But if “the world is to be evangelized in this or any generation it will be because a sufficient number of individual Christians recognize and assume their obligation to the undertaking.” However, “the evangelization of the world in this generation” was not regarded by Mott as an end in itself. We read, “The Church will not have fulfilled her task when the Gospel has been preached to all men,” because such evangelization had to be followed by

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<sup>48</sup> Mott, 4–5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 12–13.

“planting and developing in all non-Christian lands self-supporting, self-directing and self-propagating churches.”<sup>51</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century America became the leading nation in the sending out of Protestant missionaries. As Charles W. Forman admitted: “Prior to 1880 missions had been maintained by relatively small and specially dedicated groups of believers, but now they blossomed into a major interest of the churches and a significant interest of the nation.”<sup>52</sup> The number of American foreign missionaries which was 934 in 1890, reached over 9,000 in 1915. By 1915 over three million women swelled the roll of women’s missionary agencies and auxiliaries.<sup>53</sup> Student volunteers flooded the denominational sending agencies. There was a heady enthusiasm among American Protestants for “saving” and “civilizing” the world’s “heathen.” More and more denominations became involved in missionary work. This tendency changed the religious landscape in America. By the early twentieth century, American missions were represented by a wide range of separatist evangelical missions, called “faith missions” which attracted thousands of young people into preaching the gospel overseas.<sup>54</sup> After 1945, independent evangelical missions were sending more and more missionaries. In 1953, missions connected with the National Council of Churches had 9,844 missionaries, and independent missions supported 9,296 missionaries. By 1985, the number of missionaries affiliated with the National Council decreased to 4,349, whereas independent missions sponsored 35,386 missionaries. The separate evangelical missions traditionally were affiliated with either the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Associations or the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association. However, in 1985, 19,905 missionaries out of 35,386 mission personnel affiliated with independent missions were sent abroad directly by their home organization omitting these two associations.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 6–7, 16, 164.

<sup>52</sup> C.W. Forman, “The Americans,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1982), 55.

<sup>53</sup> See P. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman’s Foreign Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870–1920*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>54</sup> D.L. Robert, “The Crisis of Missions: Premillennial Mission Theory and the Origins of Independent Evangelical Missions,” in J. A. Carpenter and W. R. Shenk (eds.), *Earthen Vessels. American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880–1980*, (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 29.

<sup>55</sup> See Table A “Overseas Career Personnel Totals,” in R.T. Coote, “Taking Aim on 2000 A.D.,” in S. Wilson and J. Siewert (eds.), *Mission Handbook: North American Protestant Ministries Overseas*, (Monrovia, CA: Missions Advanced

There are several explanations of America's exceptional activity in preaching the gospel among non-Christians. Charles W. Forman, who has discussed this question, stresses: "Christian missions, though they are a very practical activity, involved inevitably a great deal of theory and theology."<sup>56</sup> The missionary movement drew its culturally affirmative mode upon the biblical ideas and metaphors because their "Christian identity transcended any other." As to ideological assumptions behind American foreign missions, America's sense of themselves as a chosen people and a redeemer nation was a critical factor. "Among the explanations of America's unique responsibility that were offered by biblical models, the most directly appropriate was the one that had been phrased in the latter part of the seventeenth century as a Puritan 'errand into the wilderness.' While the imaginary of a city on a hill suggested the influence of an exemplary society, that of an errand into the wilderness suggested a heightened activism – the actual transforming of a message and witness to unknown, possibly fearsome and uncivilized places"<sup>57</sup> – we read in Hutchison's *Errand to the World*.

The man who generated and publicized ideas of missions was Arthur Tappan Pierson (1837–1911). He was a Presbyterian and published fifty books and thousands of articles and speeches which mobilized both denominational and parachurch missions and propagated ideas that became generally accepted assumptions of twentieth-century Protestant missions. A.T. Pierson represented so-called "conservative" tendency in evangelical history. He was premillennial dispensationalist and a founder of the tradition known as American fundamentalism. At the same time, he worked for "social Christianity" and was concerned about the increase in disparity between rich and poor. He contributed to the twentieth-century ecumenical movement which opted for church unity. Pierson was the editor of *Missionary Review* which became the best historical source for studying the varied questions of evangelical Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The journal reported on racism and oppression of ethnic minorities, segregation in the South, supported the rights of black Americans, condemned human right abuses by colonial

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Research and Communication Center, 1986), 39. See also Robert, "The Crisis of Missions," 30, ft. 2.

<sup>56</sup> See C.W. Forman, "A History of Foreign Mission Theory in America," in R.P. Beaver (ed.), *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective*, (South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1977), 89. This thorough study covers the period between 1810–1952 and divides the formation of the mission theory into four phases.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.