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**FROM MISSION TO MODERNITY:
EVANGELICALS, REFORMERS, AND EDUCATION
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EGYPT**

Paul Sedra

London: I.B. Tauris, 2011

(viii + 245 pages, bibliography, index) \$92.00 (cloth)

Reviewed by Ellen Fleischmann

Paul Sedra's rich, erudite book is a timely and welcome contribution to a recent spate of monographs on Christian missions in the Middle East that represent a growing area of scholarship in anglophone Middle East studies. Some of these works include books written by Hans-Lukas Kieser, Michael Marten, Ussama Makdisi, Inger Marie Okkenhaug, Heather J. Sharkey, and Nancy Stockdale. This body of scholarship is characterized for the most part by meticulous research and complex arguments that eschew the tendency toward mission hagiography and simplistic tropes of missionaries as bearers of modernity and progress or "agents of imperialism"—a tendency that has plagued many mission studies in other fields (Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt*, Princeton University Press, 2008, 14). Sharkey's book and Makdisi's *Artillery of Heaven* (Cornell University Press, 2007) are particularly distinguished for their readings and analyses of the voices of the "missionized" as well as those of the missionaries, through their mining little-used Arabic and (in Makdisi's case)

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Ottoman Turkish sources. They bring to the foreground different actors' agency in the missionary encounters and offer complex arguments against standard assumptions about the one-sidedness of the impact. All of these works contribute to a high standard of scholarship for studies of missions in the Middle East.

Sedra's book certainly lives up to, and in some cases, exceeds these high standards in terms of the quality of the scholarship and complexity of argument. The vast amount of data that Sedra amassed and mastered to write this book is impressive. Sources include the archives of the numerous missionary societies examined in the book, the voluminous papers of Joseph Hekekyan, diplomatic correspondence of the Foreign Office at the British National Archives, and a vast body of scholarship on the Coptic Church.

Although missions and their role and impact on nineteenth-century Egyptian society are a critical dimension of Sedra's story, the book is actually not "mission history" per se. Sedra does not narrate a straightforward, chronological history of any particular mission or group of missions, nor does he limit himself merely to discussions of missionary impacts, whether positive, negative, or both. Departing from most of the recent literature, his book focuses on that endeavor considered the major legacy of missions in the Middle East: education. So while foreign missionaries are a major topic in this book, they are integrated as a key component of a bigger picture.

From Mission to Modernity is about the construction of knowledge and power in colonial Egypt by agents that include missionaries and educated elites, and the specific pedagogies and strategies these actors employed to modernize (and, in the case of the missionaries, colonize) Egypt through education. Sedra's principal argument, which draws heavily upon the theories of Timothy Mitchell (in *Colonising Egypt*, University of California Press, 1991), Michel Foucault, and Walter Ong (in *Orality and Literacy*, Routledge, 2002), is that both indigenous elites and missionaries in nineteenth-century Egypt manipulated modern schooling as "technologies of power" that would facilitate the destruction of an oral, "traditional," and "superstitious" culture "in which the speakers of words, rather than texts, were the bearers of authority" (10, 2). The ensuing struggle Sedra analyzes constituted a "sort of epistemological warfare," the ultimate prizes

of which were power, control, and the shaping of modern Egypt (10). A key ingredient in all of this was the role that education played in instilling industry, order, and discipline into the minds and bodies of the Egyptian population.

Sedra proceeds to make his case by providing rich analyses of how diverse individuals and institutions performed this feat. The book is thus replete with a cast of fascinating characters who come alive through Sedra's slightly ironic, often elegant prose. Some of these include Briton John Lancaster, whose pedagogical system, monitorialism, was embraced and disseminated in Egypt by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and in particular by the enigmatic German-speaking Lutheran missionary John Lieder; Joseph Hekekyan, an Ottoman-Egyptian Armenian Catholic who served as an educator under Muhammad 'Ali; Coptic patriarchs Cyril IV, Demetrius II, and Cyril V, all of whom crafted complicated strategies of maneuvering among foreign missionaries, Coptic dissenters, and Egyptian authorities; British observer Lady Duff Gordon; and the individual khedives of Muhammad 'Ali's line, who interacted with many of these players and the institutions they represented. One of the pleasures of reading the book is seeing how Sedra manages to bring this collection of figures (and others) to life.

The book is organized around discussions of three major educational structures that interrelated with and influenced one another—foreign missions, Coptic schools, and Egyptian government schools. It examines how each developed techniques aimed at inculcating moral values that would be of use to each community's ultimate goals of, respectively, conversion, reform, and loyalty to the state. Sedra chronicles the failures, adjustments, and power struggles that ensued on the path to achieving these goals through education. All communities agreed (although they would not have put it that way) on the values needed to modernize Egypt: industry, discipline, reliance on the authority of texts, obedience, and order. Relationships among competing groups were ambivalent and complex. In describing how the Coptic Church and the Egyptian state conspired to undermine the influence of the American missionary schools in Upper Egypt, Sedra sagely notes that the issue among the three combatants was not about different value systems, nor about how they were

to be transmitted, but rather “about *who* was to undertake the process of transmission” (132).

Power struggles occurred not only among the contending educational institutions, but also *within* them. Sedra chronicles how early CMS missionary John Lieder, who was largely responsible for establishing CMS schools in Egypt modeled on the Lancastrian model of monitorialism, fell out with CMS administrator Samuel Gobat. Monitorialism was a methodology whereby one group of students monitored (and disciplined) their peers’ behavior in order to make those monitored feel constantly exposed so that they would not engage in transgressive behavior. The system, which was also attempted in some Egyptian state schools in the early nineteenth century, was ultimately a failure. CMS abandoned it in the 1840s. CMS authorities saw Lieder—whom Gobat criticized for trying to exert influence over the Coptic clergy, as Gobat put it, too “gently” (93)—as having “gone native,” so to speak, in his overly respectful attitude to his Coptic clerical peers. This turmoil resulted in a shift in CMS educational strategies. Another fierce internal power struggle involved Patriarch Cyril V and Coptic intellectual lay reformers who attempted to wrest control over the administration of the Coptic Church from Cyril and the clergy. The elite reformers (many of them large landowners) were “willing collaborators” with the British and supporters of ideas of modernization that upheld the new values, particularly those ideas that also promoted their own material interests (165). As Sedra’s narrative consistently illustrates, the lines between friend and foe in the overall struggle for Egyptian hearts, minds, and bodies were frequently blurred.

Sedra weaves a tale about modernity, education, cultural colonialism, and power that includes many intricate threads. This complexity is, paradoxically, both a strength and, at times, a weakness. The author’s treatment of the many complicated topics is sometimes a bit uneven and his inclusion of an inordinate amount of detail can be overwhelming. One such example is the use of long verbatim excerpts from Joseph Hekekyan’s satirical dialogue with Britons about the “ways of the East” (68). Although this and other details (such as John Lieder’s strange behavior and absence from the field) can be interesting, they also distract from the larger narrative. Sometimes long quotations and empirical data are not as illumi-

nating as Sedra's own analyses, commentary, and observations, which are almost always insightful and pithy.

A group that is notably absent from the story is students. The chapter on "resistance," where one might expect to find them, focuses primarily on the cooperation of the khedive's government with the Coptic Church in trying to resist American missionary influence and authority over the peasantry of Upper Egypt. The author provides information on peasant resistance to corvée labor and how enrollment in missionary schools was a way to get out of it. One would like to hear more directly from the students who were the target of the missionaries, Coptic educational authorities, and the Egyptian government. It is quite possible that the sources for such voices are scant and limited, however. That being said, Sedra admirably incorporates data on girls and women—who are often difficult to find in historical records—into his analysis, recounting how missionaries and Coptic educators included girls' education as part of their arsenal in the war against "tradition," backwardness," and "superstition."

That Sedra does not write a teleological narrative with chapters that focus on only one set of characters (say, missionaries) and then move on to another (the Coptic Church) in a chronological, balkanized march through the nineteenth century is a strength of this book. He continually demonstrates the intricacies and close connections among all the players, individual and institutional, by including them, and explanations of their actions and points of view, in the narrative. This narrative integration is worked out on a number of levels. Sedra reads the intertwining histories of seemingly disparate actors, institutions, and communities within the broader context of Egyptian history, which allows him to argue against, for example, the Coptic Church "exceptionalism narrative," that has "cast the history of Coptic Christians in Egypt as *sui generis*" (173). Nor does he privilege one group's influence and impact on education in Egypt (such as that of foreign missionaries) over another's. Influence and impact flow in multiple directions. Sedra refutes a number of historiographical narratives that have prevailed in Middle East educational history, including the "triumphalist awakening/enlightenment" narrative of the nineteenth-century *nahda*, and the secularization narrative that is its underpinning. He demonstrates how "faith became an idiom through which Egyptian educational reform was justified" by its diverse proponents, be they from

within missions, the Coptic Church, or the Islamic state government (175). Regardless of which type of religiosity a school sought to inculcate in Egyptians, it made the “modern” values of discipline, textuality, order, and industry congruent with its promulgated faith.

Paul Sedra is to be commended for a remarkably sophisticated piece of scholarship that tackles an array of critical themes in the history of the making of modern Egypt. The work deepens our knowledge about modernity, education, colonialism, and power in the Middle East.