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Book review: from mission to modernity: evangelicals, reformers and education in nineteenth-century Egypt

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers and Education in Nineteenth-Century Egypt

Paul Sedra

London, I.B. Tauris, 2011, viii + 245 pp

In this anthropologically-minded take on education in nineteenth-century Egypt, Paul Sedra pays special attention to the impact and reception of schooling projects established by the English Church Missionary Society (CMS). While local mission head the Reverend John Lieder was ostensibly relatively sympathetic to the traditions and values of the Coptic community targeted by the CMS, Sedra argues that the initiatives upon which he embarked nonetheless represented the sharp end of a campaign of "cultural conversion" which would ultimately have profound consequences. Far from being limited to seeking professions of allegiance to Anglican creed, Lieder's project amounted to an assault on the oral culture that prevailed within the Coptic community at the time, conceived in the missionary imagination as mere ignorance, superstition and degradation. He set about this, Sedra suggests, through the introduction of new practices of moralisation and knowledge transmission, and new structures of religious and social authority, grounded in literacy, direct access to texts, and a particular repertoire of disciplinary technologies.

From Mission to Modernity builds on and engages critically with the line of enquiry into education in modern Egypt associated with scholars like Timothy Mitchell and Gregory Starrett, structured around a broadly Foucauldian exploration of discursive shifts tied to the emergence of new structures of disciplinary power as a means of social control. In the school context, these disciplinary techniques are typified in the monitorial system of pedagogy

promoted by Joseph Lancaster in early nineteenth-century England, with its focus on order, normative evaluation and the pervasive surveillance of pupils. Where previous work has tended to focus on the diffusion of this new approach to schooling from Europe via Egyptian and colonial officialdom, one of Sedra's primary contributions is to shine light on the extent to which it was both developed and disseminated by evangelicals. Individuals like Lieder established schools and otherwise promoted the new pedagogical methods; which were in certain ways then taken up on that basis by Egyptian bureaucrats, the Coptic Church and laypersons alike. Ultimately, Sedra suggests, these dynamics would contribute to a fundamental restructuring of economies of social and political power in modern Egypt around notions of order, discipline and textual authority.

Whilst arguing this case, Sedra refuses a centre-periphery model presenting Europe as simply exporting cultural transformations to the passive colonies. In this regard, he situates himself in relation to recent historiography on Christian missions in the Middle East by authors such as Ussama Makdisi, Heather Sharkey and Marwa Elshakry, who have sought to move beyond earlier laudatory narratives crediting missionaries with helping to catalyse an efflorescence of cultural production in the region. At the heart of these revisionist approaches have been fresh efforts to explore the ways in which evangelical interventions were variously received, resisted and appropriated by local actors. Sedra's approach also links to analysis of the active appropriation and reworking – rather than mere emulation – of European models of schooling advanced by Benjamin Fortna in his work on education in the late Ottoman empire.

From Mission to Modernity thus includes chapters dealing with the responses of various actors within the Coptic community to missionary schooling, helping to bring to light diverse forms of agency and relate the discursive evolution of education to political and social contention. The patriarch Cyril IV, Sedra argues, hoped that going along with the textualising drive of the missionaries, which included efforts to rationalise the Coptic

language and "recover" and print religious manuscripts, might contribute to revivifying his flock and forging new forms of political identity grounded in a "modern Coptic subjectivity" (p. 112). The flagship Church-run Great Coptic School was to play a key role in this process. Lay elites, Sedra suggests, similarly viewed the disciplinary techniques exemplified in the missionary schools as a means to "enlighten" what they saw as a backward, superstitious Coptic community. But amid intra-communal struggles for authority and resources, the projects they pursued were distinct from the Church initiatives. Rather than focusing on strengthening the communal identity of a separate, protected Christian minority, these elites aspired to produce docile, productive labourers and promote citizenship for Copts on an equal footing with the rest of the population. Meanwhile, Upper Egyptian peasants apparently saw in missionary schools a potential refuge for their children from the corvee labour associated with nation-building projects.

There is a great deal to recommend in Sedra's treatment of the topic. He makes productive use of discourse analysis, whilst resisting the temptation to give in to abstractions. Far from being "mere language", discourse here is done justice in the fuller Foucauldian sense, encompassing bodily practices, social relations and institutions. He equally resists the temptation to allow analysis of large-scale shifts in discursive structures to obscure questions of personal experience and individual agency. In addition to the chapters on appropriations of missionary education outlined above, chapters exploring the biographies of Lieder and Joseph Hekekyan, an Armenian who studied in England and later played an important role in Egyptian state educational reforms, are particularly welcome in this regard. These discussions help to emphasise that understanding human subjectivities as constructed or constrained by discourse need not entail sacrificing individual capacities of decision-making and originality to an anonymous flux of epistemes or endless webs of disciplinary power. The young Hekekyan and Lieder are exposed to similar influences and they subsequently dedicate

themselves to comparable reform initiatives in Egypt. Perhaps in part because of his own background and sense of cultural alienation in England, however, Hekekyan deploys his reformist ideas with a quite different sensibility to Lieder's; in pursuit of a project that is moralising rather than missionary and which operates in the name of the state rather than God's dominion.

Compared with the relative ease of perusing missionary records stored together in collections like the CMS archives in Birmingham, Sedra presumably faced challenges in locating Arabic primary sources that might offer direct insights into the perspectives of local actors and the finer details of their responses to the missionaries' educational projects. When it comes to investigating appropriations of the new pedagogical methods, he is not able to boast access to resources comparable with the vast Ottoman state archives explored by Fortna, for instance, with their school architectural plans, syllabuses, text books, disciplinary records, photographs, official correspondence, and the like. This inevitably places limits on the level of empirical detail that he is able to bring to bear in his analysis of how educational methods introduced to Egypt in part by Lieder were in practice refashioned within the confines of institutions established by the Coptic church and lay elites. He deals with this as best he can, with strategies including the use of missionary records to offer insights into the behaviours and motivations of non-missionary actors and the institutions they developed.

This point aside, Sedra offers much that is important and new, subjects his source materials to analysis that is both subtle and interesting, and advances live debates. Moreover, he has produced a fluently-written, clearly-structured and accessible book that is a pleasure to read. His work is an impressive contribution to the literature on missionaries in the Middle East and on education in modern Egypt, the latter subject all the more significant in light of the influence exerted by the large numbers of Egyptian educators employed elsewhere in the region and beyond in the course of the twentieth century. *From Mission to Modernity* is

recommended for scholars, students and readers outside academia with an interest in these topics.

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