Re-inventing Islam: Gender and the Protestant Roots of American Islamophobia

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In Helen Moody Stuart's 1920 novel *Fatmeh: A Common Story of Mission Schools for Moslem Girls*, Stuart creates a fictional Syrian family where one day young Fatmeh tells her parents she wants to attend the Christian missionary school to learn to read. "What do you want with reading?" retorts Fatmeh's mother. Her mother scolds her and tells her to attend to her household chores. It is Fatmeh's father, however, who encourages his daughter to attend the school, as it might help her marriage prospects (129). Stuart's novel, published during the ascent of American missionary activity in the Middle East, was written to demonstrate that young Arab Muslim girls can achieve agency from a backward religion and overbearing family by converting to Christianity in early twentieth century Syria. It was intended to inspire young women to consider becoming effective and life-changing missionaries as it was to encourage congregations to support missionary activity. *Fatemeh* is only one of several fascinating

fiction and non-fiction works written by women missionaries, or about women in the mission field, presented by Deanna Ferree Womack in *Re-Inventing Islam.*

The historiography of American and British missionaries in the Near East has become an important area of research not only for mission studies but within modern Middle Eastern and American Studies as well. Ever since the seminal publications of *British Interests in Palestine* and *American Interests in Syria* by A.L. Tibawi in 1961 and 1966, respectively, the history of Anglo-American missions in the Middle East has taken a predominantly masculine approach. Aside from the important contributions of female scholars like Christine Lindner, Heleen Murre-van den Burg, Lisa Joy Pruitt, and Dana Robert, the focus of British and American mission history in the Middle East has been on men and male decisions about mission strategy. Womack's work highlights not only the writing, thinking, and work of women missionaries in Muslim lands, but it includes material that has been absent in previous research: the fictional publications and material culture collected or worn by missionaries, both men and women. Her research provides an invaluable contribution to the historical interpretation of missionaries living in Muslim majority lands in the twentieth century.

The argument that western Christians have created or "re-invented" Islam in their own image or through their own preconceptions was well noted by Norman Daniel in his seminal work *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* in 1960. Womack, however, argues that "Protestant women took on a larger role in defining and critiquing Islamic cultures," focusing on "Muslim women's experiences, often expanding or countering information male writers had provided" (99). In their critique of Islam, women missionaries "as religious leaders" played key roles in providing new perspectives "in perpetuating stereotypes about Islam" (21). Building on her previous work on American missionary views of Islam and her interest in gender studies, *Re-inventing Islam* is a welcome addition to the growing field of missionary literature on Islam by focusing on "gender discourses, images, and performances—not simply "women's issues" (13).

This well written and solidly crafted study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter one lays the groundwork, introducing the reader to

Protestant views of Islam from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Womack then jumps to the nineteenth century where English speaking Protestant missionaries began to churn out a wide variety of material about Islam. Her overarching theme is that Protestants "re-invented" Islam in each era to suit their needs for mission. Viewing this history through the lens of gender, she highlights that by "reinforcing longstanding Protestant theological discourses and solidifying American views of Muslim men and women as exotic, immoral, or threatening, missionaries re-invented Islam" (25). This is further developed in chapter two when she notes that the veil was not of concern in the sixteenth century, but became a focal point of Muslim misogyny and backwardness in the nineteenth century when compared to the Victorian view of a Christian woman. Missionary literature often says as much about one's own personal and cultural anxieties as about the perceived detriments of the host community.

Chapter three provides an overview of standard missionary texts on Islam, focusing, however, on how gender roles in Muslim societies are viewed as evidence by "Muslim male licentiousness" and the submissive "condition of Muslim women" (77). It is here that Womack introduces an important, and often overlooked genre, that of missionary fiction, primarily written by women missionaries about women and families. Womack argues that this novel category of missionary publishing provided a fresh way to encourage young women to consider the mission field as a viable and valued career path. Chapter four follows up on this line of research by examining juvenile and young adult literature. Womack provides several examples, from Samuel and Amy Zwemer's well-known 1902 publication *Topsy-Turvy Land*, to the less well-known missionary nurse story *Cap and Candle* by Dorothy Blatter in 1961. Womack demonstrates that this literature had the effect of evoking sympathy for the status of Muslim women and girls, as real people with contributions to make in their societies, but also "upheld western norms regarding marriage and women's roles" (143).

Chapters five and six move into the realm of material culture, including photos of indigenous "specimens" as well as costumes and trinkets brought back by missionaries to display for supporting communities. "Dressing up" for churches became a mainstay of missionary

furloughs to teach about and create interest in Muslim cultures and lands. Womack acknowledges the tension, however, for missionaries between living authentically as westerners in their missionary lands of residence and creating exciting stories for uninformed audiences that often-held western stereotypes about Islamic gender norms. Womack examines the experience of Dr. Eleanor Taylor Caverley, a medical doctor of the American Reformed Mission in Kuwait. She includes pictures of Calverley, and her daughters decked out in what is portrayed as traditional female Kuwaiti garb, with her husband, Rev. Edwin Calverly, standing with them in his smart western three-piece suit. Calverley's pictures, and her own memoir, *My Arabian Days and Nights* from 1958, both substantiated western Protestant views of Islam as a backward religion and culture, but her stories also humanized women. Calverley was able to "re-invent Islam" for the purpose of highlighting the lives of Arab Muslim women who had real hopes and dreams and agency in their own right within a very different religious culture. Womack notes that Caverly's experience was often replicated, that such nuanced experiences led some missionaries and mission agencies to ultimately advocate for dialogue rather than following traditional models of paternalistic missionizing.

Chapter seven concludes the research, tying together her argument that western missionary literature and material culture provided views of Muslims which intrigued readers and their supporting communities but also Orientalized Muslim men and women. By the twentieth century, the well-entrenched Protestant missionary worldview began to develop diverse perspectives on Islam and gender through the writings and perspectives of a variety of men and women missionaries. The intriguing pictures, and in some cases completely fabricated stories of Muslims, sowed the seeds for some Christian denominations to begin approaching Islam through the lens of dialogue. Others used these modern resources to re-imagine and re-invent "centuries-old tropes about violent Muslim men and oppressed Muslim women" (9). Ultimately, Womack argues that these tropes continue to contribute to American views about Islam today, "re-inventing Islam through repetition, appropriation, adaptation, and the use of existing ideas about Muslims for new purposes" (14).

A final comment about this book might be made regarding the choice of *Islamophobia* as a term for this anti-Muslim worldview. Womack acknowledges that this is a contested term, but she highlights the relationship between the roots of Islamophobia and American racism, which many researchers have begun to recognize. However, I wonder if the term might not suggest that this "fear" is a benign or unusual peculiarity that can be easily overcome, that just as we might get over our phobia of spiders, we too might move beyond our phobia of Muslims. It is important to recognize that the term also denotes the reality of bigotry, hatred, and actions that lead to the intentional exclusion of Muslims from public life and the erosions of their civil rights. The same might be said of *xenophobia* in today's American public life. The government is not only uneasy about foreigners, but is actually rounding them up and deporting them. Womack maintains that even though the term has limitations, it "conveys the way in which anti-Muslim perceptions and actions spread today through rhetoric and imagery that prey on fears about Islam" (243), that Muslim men are terrorists and veiled Muslim women are in need of saving if not only by white men, also by white women.

Re-Inventing Islam highlights the age-old problem of Orientalism and western Christian racist views of Muslims. However, the use of gender studies to engage this material, as well as the use of fiction, children and young adult literature, and material culture, as part of the overarching "texts" of an Anglo missionary worldview of Muslims and Islam, is fresh and most welcomed. Her research demonstrates the breadth and depth of the Protestant missionary impact that was subtle and pervasive, going beyond written strategy reports from mission conferences into church basements where foreign trinkets could be displayed and in home parlors where young girls could read stories of children in far-away lands and might aspire to be a missionary herself.

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