

Imperialism, Evangelization, and the Moroccan Landscape

Latifa Safoui

ABSTRACT

Christian missionary evangelization reached its culminating point during the nineteenth century. Many experts in the field of missionary studies owe this flurry of Christian missions to an equivalent extending reach of imperialism, which, they contend, had largely facilitated the work of the Christian missions, providing them with the necessary logistic and financial support. The present paper puts forward a different view based on the trajectory of the Christian missions in Morocco at the epoch. It argues that the grand aims of imperialism were far from being spiritual. Furthermore, the political situation of Morocco during the colonial era, being a highly disputed colonial territory amongst the then superpowers, Britain and France, generated a conflict of interests that influenced the missions' strategies of work there. The claim that Christian missionaries served as imperial agents in Morocco, working on promoting the high interests of their colonial countries, is open to question.

Keywords: Christian missions, Imperialism, Morocco, Nineteenth Century.

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L. Safoui*

Ph.D. in comparative studies, Teacher of English language and culture in Reda Slaoui CPGE institution, Agadir, Morocco.
(e-mail: ssafoui@yahoo.fr)

**Corresponding Author*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Morocco, like in other parts of the world, the missionary movement coincided with the pinnacle of European imperialism. The essence of this argument is not hard to apprehend. Upon their arrival, missionaries engaged actively in the social lives of their subjects of evangelization, distributing food and medicine while proselytizing in the process. They aimed not only at religious conversion but also at altering the cultural beliefs and assumptions rooted in their field of mission, generally viewed as heathen and perverse. Yet, such a line of argumentation is contested by other scholars who argue that the relationship between missions and imperialism is far too complex than is commonly believed. The religious activities of the missions were so heterogeneous and variegated, presenting thus real challenges in their study, which did not allow for forms of straightforward generalizations. A more nuanced perspective maintains that the connection between the two was rife with ambiguity and equivocation rather than the widespread monolithic grand narrative of cooperation between missions and imperialism.

II. CHRISTIAN MISSIONS AND AN AMBIGUOUS PRESENCE

According to Andrew Porter (1997), the intersection between the imperial expansion and the missionary one created a sense of ambivalence surrounding this historical encounter. He argues that a relationship of distrust was established between the British missions and the imperial states, especially when it was found that missionary interests clashed with the imperial project (p.40). This, Porter argues, was partly due to denominational conflicts and the lack of unity of work and purpose between the Christian missions. The heterogeneous aspect of their work hints at a form of instrumentalism as regards their relationship with their secular states. Porter (1997) explains:

Missionaries came to regard secular authorities in a similarly utilitarian way. British missionary enterprise thus sometimes provided channels through which imperial controls followed; at other times it delayed annexation and colonization or even subverted imperial authority. In many places (sometimes purposely, often unintentionally) Christian churches, British and indigenous, provided powerful stimuli to communal unity and opposition to colonial rule. (p. 41)

In Morocco, the same utilitarian approach was registered. Religious missions invariably turned to their governments for help whenever they encountered a difficulty of any kind inside their field of work. Reports abound on how both British and American protestant missions consistently turned to their consuls to secure lodging or to force a way using their European protections. At this level, one can only endorse the claim that missions did benefit from their connections with the European consuls. With the exception of the American mission, which made no secret of its indulgence in politics, the question of the

British missions serving the same role is not easy to settle. In what follows, I try to explore the status of the British missions vis-à-vis this intricate issue.

The connection alluded to above between missions and their consuls were simply inevitable within a colonial context and should not lead one to draw hasty conclusions as to the existence of suspected, premeditated collusion between the missions and the superpowers in Morocco. The relationships between missionaries and their respective consuls, co-religionists, traders, and the like can be apprehended at a much simpler level of similarity of interests because of sameness of origin and of spiritual and ideological creed. It is not forcibly synonymous with intentional cooperation within some sort of a grand conspiracy theory. Moreover, the identity of creed, nationality, faith, and other determinants of culture cannot in a simplistic way, “be interpreted as the identity of purpose” (*as cited in* Okon, 2014, p. 201). The claim that Christian missionaries served as imperial agents in Morocco, working on promoting the high interests of their colonial countries, is debatable. Kalu notes that “governments did not establish the colonies for missionary goals; rather the purposes of government and that of missions often differed both in content, philosophy and in execution” (*as cited in* Okon, 2014, p. 201). This points to the fact that missions and religious conversion cannot be set as the ultimate goal of nineteenth-century imperialism. The Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui argue that nineteenth-century imperialism can only be apprehended, and made full sense of when anchored in the economy (1977, p. 293). Other variables did correlate in the process, meeting and parting company, but the overriding factor fuelling the imperial superpowers was political leverage and economic exploitation.

Within a Moroccan context, the situation is not so much different. Laroui notes that in the nineteenth century, the superpowers might have differed on legion subjects, might have expressed divergent, often contradictory, and mutually exclusive opinions vis-à-vis different matters, but would all speak the same language, when their economic interests were in peril. Such was the case in Morocco, with the superpowers resolving their differences in the 1904 “Entente Cordiale” after a considerably long period of heightened rivalry and reciprocal jealousy. Great Britain, which was long regarded as Morocco’s formidable European ally, was only too willing to sacrifice this alliance to follow better prospects in Egypt.

III. THE HETEROGENEOUS ACTIVITY OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

The controversy surrounding nineteenth-century Christian missions’ link to imperialism attests to the intricacy of the matter and to the highly paradoxical nature of Christian missions. Highlighting the problematic status of the Christian missions during the imperial era, Kalu argues that:

Missionary ideology was full of paradoxes: while sharing the racist theories of the age, and supporting the official programme to transform the political and economic structure of the colonies, it realized higher values in the biblical conception of the dignity of man...the missionaries colluded with the colonial government when it suited their interests and yet would also at times unleash virulent attacks on certain styles and purpose of government (*as cited in* Okon, 2014, p. 183).

In nineteenth-century Morocco, such a state of affairs as Kalu describes above is nowhere accurate. Missionaries held different, sometimes antagonistic, views as to how mission work should be implemented. The British missions displayed more tact and reserve while undertaking their evangelical activities, guarding against acts deemed provocative, or hostile, towards the local population. The American missionaries, on the other hand, transgressed the limits of what was seen as appropriate behavior, choosing to proselytize in open markets, with little heed paid to both their fellow British missionaries’ admonitions and to Moroccan officials, who would occasionally warn them against the potential danger involved in similar acts. Such an ad-hoc way of working was a fundamental characteristic that defined the operation of the Christian missions in Morocco. Samuel M. Zwemer evokes this chaotic state of mission work in the country, and how missionaries had different strategies of work, despite their shared sense of cooperation, stating: “If anyone would be convinced of the splendid heroism and yet the sore need of greater co-operation among the workers, let him visit Morocco...one longed for the day when a united front of all the forces would face the task” (p. 566). A more illustrative example attesting to this erratic nature of missionary work would be the Central Morocco Mission. Kerr’s choice to work independently points to a scope of individual freedom missionaries enjoyed proceeding with their project without the help of the society at home or assistance from the government.

As to the North Africa Mission, the female missionaries who were in charge of the mission work displayed quite a different style of evangelizing, which went tacit and unobnoxious. Miss. Herdman, whose name was associated with the mission, and her missionary assistants were held in high esteem by the population due mainly to their focus on medical work. Evangelical work was undoubtedly in operation, yet, it was of the sort that triggered no overt opposition. We have learned before how Sultan Hassan I was alerted to their proselytizing activity among the women and girls of Fez, as they had free

access to the interior space, an advantage they had over their male colleagues. However, they continued to receive patients in their station and weaved stories of humanitarian work among the Moroccan population, which was in dire need of such care. Aubin gives his account of the North Africa Mission ladies' work:

These ladies do not attempt to proselytize. They are content with giving practical medical help, along with some advice, and with singing devotional hymns by the bedside of their patients and attempting to interest them in our Saviour, Sidna Aïssa. One need not say that the *toubibat* (lady doctors) have never converted anyone. But they are charitable and looked upon with a kindly eye in Fez. (1906, p. 281)

Aubin (1906) is wide of the mark, claiming that the missionary ladies did not attempt to proselytize for the simple reason that this is just what they came for. Seemingly, He intends to say that their proselytizing was not of a provocative kind unlike the American missionaries of the Gospel Missionary Union, whom he describes as "less esteemed than the English ladies" (p. 281), owing to their open, allegedly, inconsiderate manners. Aubin comments on their methods, which he, ironically, sets in contrast with those of the English ladies: "At first they adopted the trying custom of preaching in the streets, and they had to be requested to keep quiet, not to compromise the other Europeans. They then betook themselves to the country, and now tour the villages with an entire lack of success" (p. 281).

The variegated ways in which missionaries operated in Morocco are not supportive of the claim that they were complicit with the imperial project of their respective governments. The instances of endorsement of the colonial policies registered in their narratives unravel an underlying assumption that imperialism was capable of salvaging the lives of Moroccans from a state of moral decay and political anarchy the country was allegedly caught in. One is bound to come across outspoken opinions about the necessity that a superpower invaded Morocco in order to rescue it from corruption, social disintegration, and economic ruin. However, this is not to be taken as an adherence to the imperial ethos, to looting and exploitation of the country's riches. Such pro-European civilization opinions abound in missionary narratives and cannot be interpreted as an incitement of imperialism in its political and economic sense. Similar opinions were as well expressed by the Moroccans themselves, when they got exasperated by the heavy taxes, by lack of health care, the ramping of corruption and mismanagement, and by the excesses of a government that was incapable of imposing its rule and protecting its people.

The Protestant missionaries who worked in Morocco hailed from European and American civilizations and cultures. It comes as little surprise that they espoused views that glorify their own advanced state of progress, which stood in stark contrast with a country seen to be caught in the mire of backwardness. A researcher of mission work ought not to be thin-skinned to the missionaries' chilling remarks about a scene of violence they witnessed, or the human strife they were subjected to, on the soil of late-nineteenth-century Morocco. More importantly, such missionary views are not to be interpreted as involvement in the imperial project of the superpowers in Morocco at the epoch.

IV. MINISTRY IN HARD TIMES

Jean Louis Miège advocates the thesis that the Protestant missions which operated in Morocco in the nineteenth century were highly unlikely to have entered into any sort of collusion with their governments, citing that most of these missions suffered from a scarcity of material resources, which often compelled them to abandon projects of opening new stations or proceed to close already opened ones. Through his rigorous, positivist approach, he provides a meticulous, pedantic account of the revenues of these missions to demonstrate how the latter was approximately invariably in a state of permanent financial hardships, which worsened by 1891. Miège (1955) mentions some manifestations of this crisis as follows:

Aggravation qui fut le lot commun des missions. En 1892, le travail médical fut interrompu à Hope House pendant quelques semaines faute d'argent pour maintenir le fonds de médicaments. En 1903, la Southern Morocco Mission fut contrainte d'abandonner, devant l'importance de son déficit la station d'Azemmour, de rappeler un missionnaire qui fut chargé de parcourir l'Écosse à la recherche de souscriptions. La North Africa Mission, quelques années plutôt avait été obligée de semblable façon de renoncer à l'ouverture d'une station permanente à Sefrou. On pourrait multiplier les exemples. [Aggravation was a common feature of the missions. In 1892, medical work was interrupted at Hope House for a few weeks due to a lack of money to maintain the medical fund. In 1903, the Southern Morocco Mission was forced to abandon the Azemmour station because of the size of its deficit, and to recall a missionary who was charged with the task of traveling through Scotland in search of subscriptions. The North Africa Mission, a few years earlier, had been obliged in a similar way to give up the opening of a permanent station at Sefrou. We could multiply the examples.](p.184)

Miège concludes that given the financial constraints Protestant missions had to deal with, such claim that they received subsidies from their government, or that they had allied with them in what can be conceived of as an imperial grand project to colonize Morocco, is without foundation. He recommends taking this into consideration to better appreciate the value of missionary work within its confined limits, which is bound to yield a fair and reasonable assessment of their experience in late nineteenth-century Morocco. (1955, p.184)

Miège's view is shared by Budgett Meakin, who also evokes the restricted resources of the Christian missions which operated in Morocco at the time. Referring to the North Africa Mission, he says: "Though no salaries are guaranteed, its weekly needs on an extremely moderate scale amount to over £200." (Meakin, 1899, p. 332). A similar remark is made in relation to both the Central Morocco Mission and the Southern Morocco Mission; "The 'Central' and 'Southern Morocco Missions' are also 'faith missions', with no guaranteed supplies, and all are worthy of the heartiest support" (1899, p. 332). Lack of financial support was exacerbated by a concomitant absence of political and legal backing. The Protestant missions working in Morocco were left to their fate to deal with the French authorities that took a free hand in Morocco.

V. SECULAR GREED OR SPIRITUAL NEED?

In his second volume, *Morocco after Twenty-Five Years*, Robert Kerr devotes a good portion of his writing to showing how the British authorities retreated totally from the Moroccan scene immediately after signing the "Entente Cordiale" treaty in 1904, leaving its subjects thus under the mercy of the French, who, by the missionary doctor's account was anything but merciful. In this sense, Kerr wonders indignantly, "British merchants are ever asking the question. How is it that the subjects of other nations have their claims paid and we are unable to recover ours?" (1912, p. 283). The missionary further recounts how he was subjected to abuse of power by the French police, resulting in physical torture, without the incident raising an eyebrow of his British consuls, who should, undoubtedly, had received orders to refrain from any sort of interference with what was regarded politically as French internal affairs. Kerr concludes that "With the Anglo-French agreement of April 1904, British prestige came to an end in the Land of the Setting Sun" (1912, p. 285).

Kerr's disillusionment with his country's reaction to his complaint demonstrates how missionaries were treated by their government, a treatment that is unsuggestive of any form of connivance or mutual, shadowy work. Britain's imperial project did not count religious conversion of the natives as one of its preoccupations, albeit, as previously mentioned, mission work might, in one way or another, have evinced support for imperialism. Kerr goes on in his narrative to disclose how the French authorities, on the other hand, ensured the safety of their missions in places not directly under their control. The missionary advances evidence of France and Spain intervening on behalf of their missionary subjects while simultaneously defending their imperialist gains and political interests wherever and whenever these were at risk of being compromised (1912, p. 300).

Such disparity between colonial powers in their treatment of missions and missionaries can be justified on the grounds that the latter often departed from the mainstream of "metropolitan imperial sentiment" (Porter, p. 381), which placed narrow nationalistic interests above everything else. Kerr's story is one corroborative example. Such preference for imperial gains put Christian missions in unenviable positions when the superpowers would come at loggerheads and their interests would clash. This is most manifest in the tendency of colonial authorities "to make life difficult for missions of different nationalities and even on occasion to expel them" (Porter, p. 381). It is shown, above all, in how the French authorities dealt with the British missions in Algeria in 1897. British missionaries reported cases of verbal abuse and of draconian laws hindering their activities, which were denounced by the French authorities as religious propaganda, susceptible to jeopardizing the French high interests. *The Chronicle of the London Missionary Society* (1897) published the North Africa Mission's reaction to the French attack, where they renewed their respect for the French law and offered a formal apology. In this sense, they said: "We have several times assured the highest French authorities that we have sought to be loyal to them and that we have never knowingly broken French laws, but that if we had done so unwittingly, we desire to apologize" (p. 23). As a gesture of goodwill, the British mission removed its agents from Tlemcen, a city located near the Moroccan frontier, to show their full compliance to the French orders and resolve the conflict.

France's hostility to the British missions can then be construed within the framework of the heated imperial rivalry between the superpowers at the epoch, with every country striving to curb the influence of its rival. The French authorities in Algeria eyed the North Africa Missionaries with suspicion lest the latter be secret agents of their country. The brutal expulsion of J. C. Ginsburg, the superintendent of the British mission, the London Jewish Society, is another case in point challenging the thesis of the

missionaries' collusion with their imperial states. Ginsburg did little to endear himself to the Jewish notables of Essaouira, most of whom were under British protection, which aroused their antagonism and fierce objection to his proselytising activities. In a pamphlet he wrote to give his account of the persecution he was endured, he held both these notables and the British officials responsible for the failure of his mission. In his words,

Let England, let Christendom clearly understand this, that persecution was not brought about by the native authority, or by the religious fanaticisms of the Jews or Mahommedans, but by the ill will, jealousy, and malice of a handful of disaffected Jews, enjoying British protection under, and abetted by, English officials. (as cited in Gottreich, 2007, p.168)

Ginsburg's condemnation of his own country, Britain, cannot be overemphasized. Pondering how the British protestant missionaries reacted to their governments, and how the latter treated religious missions, one might perceive an unevenness and expediency in the way imperial powers dealt with Christian missionaries in Morocco, which points to difference and disparity rather than a presumably grand conspiracy theory that involved the missionaries and their affiliated countries. What was at stake were imperial gains and imperial profits. In the case of Morocco, Christian conversion did not figure as an element worthy of consideration in the colonial designs for the country. Moreover, the latter's unique history as a nation that resisted the colonial invasion, for a considerably long time relative to its neighbors, weakens such eventuality.

It follows that the yoking together of religious missions and imperialism involves a simplistic vision of the work of both missions and imperialism. Missionary discourse scarcely yields itself to such a monolithic, totalitarian approach that leaves little room for alternative readings other than the deterministic imperial one. A careful study of missionary narratives about Morocco renders the imperial argument most questionable without totally rejecting it. Besides taking an undeniable advantage of their position as European subjects and of the favors such position bestowed upon them, which, facilitated their task to a large extent, missionaries did, nevertheless, on various occasions, voice opposition and critique to their governments' actions deemed inhumane, counterproductive, or self-defeating.

Missionaries partook of the racist ideology of their age, brandished the slogans of the civilizing mission and the white man's burden, and shared much of the Enlightenment narrative in vogue at the epoch. However, venturing to say that they worked as agents of the imperial powers in Morocco involves no little exaggeration. Where imperialism comes into play is at the cultural level. Following Heather J. Sharkey (2013), missionary activity is shared in Edward Said's notion of cultural imperialism. Still, it is a brand of cultural imperialism that is not marshaled by the European governments. It is rather of an individual nature, where missionaries would, single-handedly, choose to inculcate their subjects' values of the Western culture through speeches, classes, religious songs, or any other form of preaching and communication. To better comprehend this form of attenuated, corollary cultural imperialism, one has to read the narratives of missionaries themselves.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study endeavoured to explore the notorious link between the Christian missions and imperialism to get to the conclusion that, related to the Moroccan field, there is no evidence supporting this claim. Apart from the American mission which operated in the country and whose involvement in political affairs was well-known and documented, the British missions, most of which were independent of the missions at home, did not implement any actions in that direction. These missions were invariably in a state of deprivation, lacking both financial and personal security. The superpowers, namely Britain and France, put their secular interests and imperial gains above the dissemination of the word of Christ. It follows that the assumption of probable collusion between the nineteenth-century Christian missions and the expansionist, imperial project is untenable in a Moroccan context.

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