

Book Review of *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?*

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Peter Pikkert, *Protestant Missions in the Middle East: Ambassadors to Christ or Culture* (WEC Canada, 2008), 226 pages.

Pikkert has presented us here with an immensely useful book. It should be required reading for anyone planning on engaging in Christian ministry in the Middle East or Turkey.

The author is tackling one central question, which he explicitly enunciates (14), and we might summarize as *Given all the time and money put into missions in the Middle East and Turkey, why have so few Muslims converted?* He then outlines for us his methodology, which is primarily based on the work of two scholars, both very well-known in their respective fields: Samuel Huntington and David Bosch. Huntington who wrote the famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (Simon & Schuster 1998), has proposed that after the Cold War the main sources of conflict in the world will be civilizational, and he is concerned particularly with the clash of the West (one civilization) and Islamdom (another civilization). Bosch is recruited so that his theory of paradigm shifts as a way of interpreting (and critiquing) the history of mission can be used. (The primary text of Bosch's is his *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books 1991.)

And that is primarily what this book is: an analysis of the history of the Western, non-Catholic mission to the Middle East and Asia Minor. That task is already formidable and no attempt, thankfully, is made to recount, say, the Catholic missions during the same period of time, or the Western missions to Persia. Chapters one through four each treat a distinct historical period and form the core of the book. Chapter five represents a somewhat jolting shift from historical analysis and critique—which the author does well—to theology and praxis of mission today, and is the weakest chapter in this commendable volume.

Pikkert's division of modern history in terms of the regions he is focusing on is as follows: 1800-1918, that is, the end of the WWI and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, or as David Fromkin has called it, the peace to end all peace¹. The second period is through 1946, the year when Syria achieved independence and the year before the founding of the State of Israel. The third period dates through 1979, it was a period of Arab nationalism and the quick ascendancy of certain countries in the region due to petro-dollars². It was also the time that saw the formation of non-denominational missionary agencies and a movement away from those connected explicitly to various denominations. The final period begins at the time of Iranian Revolution and is marked by the revival of a politically vibrant form of Islam that at times found in certain exercises of violence a viable way of influencing political developments. Pikkert sees us living in this period as of the time of the writing of his book (2005).

¹ The title of Fromkin's memorable and widely-read history (Holt 2001) of the formation of the modern Middle East, primarily by the UK and France.

² An account of this period can be found in Daniel Yergin's *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (Free Press 1993).

One could argue that certain of the dates should be different: why 1979 and not 1967—the traumatic event of the Six Day War, wherein the collective armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq were devastated by the small state of Israel? Many Muslims in the Arab states saw this as a clear sign that they had not been worshipping God according to his will, otherwise victory would have been assured as it was in the days of the Prophet. Reformation movements initiated by such luminaries as Hasan Bana and Muhammad Ibn ‘abd al Wahab were waiting to guide people back to the straight path. Or one might point out that certainly 2001 should have initiated a brand new period in his chronology.

But these are minor points: the division of historical epochs is always a messy business, and one can always think of counter-examples. In the former case the entire period of the 60’s and 70’s represented an era of increasing disillusion with Pan-Arabism, communism, and secularism. In the later case (2001), it is simply too soon to see if it can be identified as a key shifting point in terms of the Protestant/evangelical mission from the West to the Middle East and Asia Minor. (In fact his division of historical periods could be used in a productive manner by other scholars.)

Pikkert proceeds at a steady pace, with many quotes from missionary reports and journals, especially *The Moslem World*³ and the *annual report* of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Some will find the proliferation of quotations to be tiresome, especially because some of them are quite lengthy, but given how negative he is regarding most of the missionary activity over the last two centuries, it is appropriate that he use the words from the sources themselves—the references, though lengthy at times, to primary sources are worthwhile and appreciated.

And negative he is. His main target is the so-called Great Experiment. When Protestant missionaries arrived in the area in the early 1800’s they soon decided that direct evangelization of local Muslims was too dangerous and difficult; thus was born the Great Experiment, whereby missionaries would revive what they saw as the moribund churches of the land—whether Maronite, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, or what have you. These churches would be resurrected in the image of Western Protestant evangelicalism with all its iconoclastic and individualistic trappings. In other words, they were largely ambassadors of their culture—even to the other Christians. So schools, orphanages, clinics, printing presses and hospitals were all established, mostly with the aim of reviving the Christian communities. Pikkert argues that this behavior was suspicious to the local rulers, making their communities highly visible when they had managed to survive over the centuries largely by *not* being auspicious. Consequentially the various genocides and mass emigrations from the Middle East and Asia Minor over the centuries can be attributed, at least in part, to this misguided Great Experiment.

Not only that, the Great Experiment quite clearly did not work. While it did result eventually in the founding of Protestant churches composed mostly of OBP’s (Orthodox-background Protestants), it should not be surprising to anyone that even these Westernized Christians had little interest after centuries of mistrust and isolation in suddenly flinging wide the gates of the churches to Turkish and Arab Muslims converts. This is the central narrative of the book, and Pikkert pulls no punches. But his historical review is not entirely negative, for during each of the four historical periods he concludes the chapter with a list of what went right as well as what went wrong.

And there are some figures here and there who showed real genius and dedication to not only their mission board but to the actual societies they lived in. One such figure is Temple Gairdner

³ Now called *The Muslim World*.

of Cairo (1873-1928) who wrote a grammar in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Such an approach would be influential to others like George Kelsey, founder of Kelsey Language Institute in Amman where Pikkert studied Arabic (as did I, though many years after him!) Gairdner also wrote plays in Arabic based on biblical stories to which both Muslims and Christians were invited. Significantly, he was able to actually appreciate some of the commendable qualities of Islam and the Qur'an, something that few missionaries at his time were able to do, just as they were unable to find much of value in the ancient churches of the land. Thus Gairdner is able to write⁴ to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1923 saying plainly that, "The primary aim of the Anglican Church in Egypt is the evangelisation of the non-Christian population, and it does not desire to draw adherents from either the Coptic or the Evangelical Churches."

Another particularly interesting example (54, 55) provided by Pikkert of one of the few missions that did not buy into the Great Experiment was the short-lived Lutheran Orient Mission Society's (LOMS) mission to the Kurds led by L. O. Fossum. He, like Gairdner, was able to evaluate the local Muslim society identifying positive traits where many missionaries saw none. While the mission in Kurdistan was cut short due to WW I, and Fossum, a medical doctor and brilliant linguist, died at the age of 41 near Van, the fruit of his ministry was remarkable.

But on the balance the verdict is that the Great Experiment was a great failure, exporting individualistic ethno-centric Protestantism that was naïve of the complexities of the region—linguistic, social, historical, political, and so on.

While his historical review is insightful, there are a number of faults that must be mentioned: the book is in need of good editing. It is not uncommon to find two basic errors in grammar or spelling on the same page. For example page 12, where Church Mission Society is incorrectly abbreviated CSM and *Moslem World* is misspelled *Moslim World*. On one occasion he writes of the "importance of intermission cooperation," which left me briefly scratching my head trying to identify which period of *intermission* he was referring to, but realized he was speaking of intermission cooperation, that is, the different agencies and groups working together, something which had a positive affect on efficiency.

On a logical level there is a problem with his section on Islamophobia (147-149). In this section he is discussing the period beginning in 1979 and he talks of the demonization of Islam in the West and how the American press has produced "an endless array of books and articles disseminating malevolent slurs and pseudo-facts about Islam" (147). But how can Pikkert make such a claim—and he does not even mention the extensive self-censorship present in much of the media—while also maintaining that Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations is true? Indeed, Huntington's critics who deny that terror has any sort of intrinsic relation to Islam cite exactly the same sources as Pikkert, showing that the so-called clash is nothing more than a (probably Zionist) plot to engender enmity between the West and Islam when in all reality there is no good reason they can not co-exist peacefully. Strong cases can be made for both sides, but it is not possible to hold both sides at once: either there is a clash of civilizations, or it has been manufactured in an artificial and perhaps insidious manner. Sometimes one must choose.

But the weakest point in his book is certainly the concluding chapter, where Pikkert goes from history of Christian mission—which he does quite well—to his recommendations to "advise those pursuing Christian missions to Near East Muslims today" (189). His recommendation is for a *church-centered, New Testament spirituality*—which is the name of the chapter. His conviction

⁴ This quote is from a short article which contains a review of Gairdner's career by Matthew Rhodes: 'Anglican Mission: A Case Study' available online from the Henry Marty Center at www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk.

that such missionary work should be church-centered is the logical outcome of his thorough and convincing chronicle of the failures of the Great Experiment, which as we have seen focused mostly on medical and educational institutions, not the founding of Muslim-background congregations (MBC's), and during this work missionaries should avoid involvement in politics, which is not bad advice for the Middle East.

But what does he mean by New Testament spirituality? Throughout the book he is able to resist two extremes which are fairly common when talking about Christian missions in the region: he neither dismisses them entirely as political agents of empire who have no genuine and sincere religious motive, nor does he resort to un-nuanced hagiography. Given this, one has to wonder how we could simply resort to a slogan like "New Testament spirituality." Is there any missionary in the entire world who does not want to be like the great missionaries of the New Testament? Is there any congregation that does not claim to be a faithful continuation of the New Testament church? Is he saying that they should celebrate the Lord's Supper every day (Ac 2:46) and that women should cover their heads in church (1 Cor 11:10)? That sounds like the local Greek Catholic church here in Nazareth. For what it's worth, Pikkert does explain what he means by "New Testament spirituality," it involves, among other things, presenting "the Christian message in a clear and culturally appropriate way" (201), and "[d]isciple, train, and relinquish responsibility" (206). Not bad advice, to be certain. But it is hardly represents a paradigm shift, a la Bosch.

Notwithstanding the weakness of the final chapter, Pikkert has presented us with a valuable and helpful volume. It is especially appropriate for people training for missionary work in the region, and this would include the rising number of candidates from Korea, China, and South America. Indeed, from the point of view secular history it is also a worthwhile book to read as the spheres of religion and politics are identical in much of classical Islamic thought. Finally, I would recommend the book to Muslim scholars as well, not as an occasion for arrogance at the lack of success of Christian missions in the region, but because a fair reaction to Christian missions requires an understanding of what they are and that goes beyond mere propaganda, myth, and hearsay—commonly the case today when Muslims speak of Christian missions.