Christian Missionaries and Colloquial Arabic Printing

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christian missionaries played active roles in the development of modern Arabic publishing. First in Malta, and later in Beirut and Cairo, they printed works that ranged from the Bible to classroom textbooks and thereby influenced the content, style, and even typographic formatting of modern Arabic literature. Yet while the great majority of missionary publications were produced in literary Arabic (āṣāfīḥ), the formal language which has historically been the accepted medium for written discourse, missionaries in the 1920s and 30s also published some works in the regionally and socially variable spoken or colloquial Arabic (aš-ṣumūriyya) of the non-elite, ordinary people.

The missionaries who published works in the Arabic colloquial hoped that it would take off as a print language and in the process extend literacy rates among peoples they wished to evangelise. But ultimately it failed to do so, while efforts to promote the āṣāfīḥ provoked opposition among educated Arabic-speakers who insisted on the cultural primacy of the āṣāfīḥ as the expressive literary vehicle for all Arabs. The resentments that missionaries stoked — through their language policies and, much more broadly, through their evangelical work — still smoulder today.

This article considers missionary objectives in promoting colloquial Arabic as a print language, the controversies that ensued from their efforts, and the long-term consequences of their āṣāfīḥ experiments. The main focus is on Egypt during the interwar period of the twentieth century, years when the missionary enterprise was at

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its peak and when mission-supported colloquial publishing was enjoying its short-lived heyday.

The Missionaries and Their Movement

The missionaries who promoted colloquial Arabic were British and American Protestants, men and women, who in the 1880s began to express a growing commitment to work in Muslim societies. In discussing their goal of converting Muslims to Christianity, they arguably absorbed and adapted the aggressive expansionist rhetoric of the British Empire in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Certainly they took a combative line toward Islam itself. In 1906, for example, an American missionary in Punjab declared that Islam was Christianity's 'only rival for the conquest of the world' and urged his fellow missionaries to scramble for souls in Africa, India, and China. Along a similar vein, in 1910, a British missionary in Iran praised his colleagues in the Islamic world as 'Crusaders of the twentieth century' who were conducting 'spiritual warfare' in order to 'bring Christianity back to the East ...'.

These missionaries to Muslims were not operating in mutual isolation. On the contrary, they belonged to a global Anglo-American enterprise whose leaders boldly called for 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. Drawn together through a growing ecumenical 'inter-mission' movement that bridged denominational differences, Christian missionaries gathered in regular conferences to discuss techniques for evangelising among Muslims and published several conference-paper volumes (many for internal, private circulation only) that set out their common plans and objectives.


6 Consider, for example, Minutes of the Egypt Inter-Mission Council (Cairo 1922), a copy of which is preserved in the Presbyterian Historical Society archives in Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, working on the ground in their respective mission fields, missionaries attempted to reach out to Muslims of all ages and social classes by establishing rural and urban schools, orphanages, clinics, and hospitals. In these various institutions, they tried to spread their Christian message by distributing Bibles and religious pamphlets but encountered a basic obstacle: few people could read their books and brochures because of low literacy rates widely prevailing. Before World War I, in the Middle East as in India and Southeast Asia, literacy remained a relative rarity and was still a monopoly of male elites. To communicate broadly, therefore, missionaries decided that they would have to speak and perhaps also write in the language of the masses. For missionaries in Arabophone lands, whose bases of operation ranged from the Maghreb east to Bahrain, writing in the language of the masses meant writing in the 'ānnîyya, that is, in one of Arabic's widely variable colloquial forms.

Writing the Spoken: Efforts to Systematize Colloquial Arabic

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the era of high European imperialism, missionaries in Africa and Asia participated in a wide range of 'colonial linguistic projects' — codifying alien languages and pursuing philological study in order to map the ethnic terrain. Among peoples who had historically been non-literate, this work of linguistic systematization formalized and ratified particular dialects as regional languages, thereby catapulting them to the top of emergent language hierarchies. For example, in southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe), where there had been 'a graded continuum of Shona dialects' before the twentieth century, competing Protestant and Catholic missionaries had by 1930 'produced three mutually distinct [Shona] languages within their territorially delimited spheres of influence'. Through comparable processes, from Indonesia to Madagascar, new 'missionary lingua francas' came into being within imperial domains and gained some currency as print languages — if only via Bible translations. Meanwhile, in regions that already had literacy traditions, missionaries engaged in advanced philological and grammatical
study and worked to produce Christian literatures capable of reaching out to local audiences, often directing their persuasive efforts toward local literate elites.

Missionaries tended to take the latter approach toward the Arab peoples, who had a long and strong tradition of literacy and enjoyed a lingua franca in the Arabic fiṣḥā, the vehicle for learned (and usually written) discourse that educated Arabs could understand regardless of marked variations in their informal speech (i.e. their ḍammīyya). Arabic also had a deep tradition of linguistic scholarship, which had roots in studies of the Qur’an, a text regarded not only as the sacred Islamic scripture but also as the ultimate model of beautiful Arabic. Over many centuries, Islamic philologists and grammarians had analysed the Qur’an’s language and articulated standards for Arabic expression that writers were encouraged to follow. In other words, they had endeavoured to maintain a normative literary language in spite of the divergences in Arabic dialects, which grew more pronounced as Arabic-Islamic culture expanded territorially and assimilated or incorporated non-Arab peoples. Written Arabic thus achieved a high degree of fixity, though it never became static. On the contrary, changes in the language subtly and constantly occurred over the centuries — for example, as Arabic literati borrowed or coined new words in response to shifting social milieu.10

By the late nineteenth century, when British and American missionaries began to pursue their work among Muslims, Arabic could boast a firmly established written tradition with an illustrious literary past. Nevertheless, the pace of linguistic change had already begun to accelerate as the rapid growth of print culture and rising literacy rates encouraged new modes of literary experimentation among an expanding pool of readers and writers. Far from existing as a timeless or classical language, therefore, the fiṣḥā was on its way to becoming a ‘Modern Standard Arabic’ (to use the late twentieth-century English parlance) with a wealth of new vocabulary words and stylistic conventions.11 The bulk of missionary production in Arabic appeared in this literary language and targeted educated male elites.

Nevertheless, from the early twentieth century some missionaries began to express an interest in extending their program to larger audiences of the barely literate, those who knew how to read little more than the Arabic alphabet. Their thinking was that if they could produce works in the language that the barely literate actually spoke (as opposed to the formal fiṣḥā language that people could only learn through years of focussed study), then they would stand a chance of overcoming the high educational barrier that Arabic literacy had historically posed.

Missionaries were not the first to seize on this idea of writing and printing the plebeian vernacular. In the early 1880s, just before and after Britain’s colonial Occupation of Egypt in 1882, a small group of Europeans and Americans in Cairo had already voiced doubts about the capacity of the Arabic fiṣḥā to function as a mass medium. These foreigners had suggested that literary Arabic’s sharp divergence from colloquial Arabic, in vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax, made it inaccessible to all but the highly educated minority and that it therefore posed an obstacle to modern social progress.

The first to stake these claims had been a German named Wilhelm Spitta (1853–83), who arrived in Egypt in 1870 to direct Khedive Isma‘il’s Vice-regal Library. Spitta became an enthusiastic student of the spoken, everyday language and published a grammatical study of the Egyptian ḍammīyya as well as a collection of colloquial tales.12 Anticipating the missionaries by more than twenty years, Spitta advocated the adoption of colloquial Arabic as a written language in lieu of the fiṣḥā. Convinced that the Arabic script was a factor contributing to Egypt’s low literacy rates, in part because of its non-representation of short vowels, he devised a new ‘Egyptian alphabet’, based on Roman letters (i.e. a modified Latin print orthography), for rendering colloquial phonetics. Spitta was thus the first to call for the elevation of colloquial Arabic — specifically in a Romanised Cairene form — as a language of print culture.13

As the nineteenth century ended other Westerners took up and expanded on Spitta’s Arabic agenda, while expressing keen admiration for what they regarded as

12 Wilhelm Spitta, Grammatik des arabischen Vulgärdialekts von Aegypten (Leipzig 1880); Wilhelm Spitta, Contes arabes modernes (Leiden 1883).
the structural logic and dynamism of the colloquial language. The German Karl Vollers, for example, who worked as a director at Cairo’s Dar al-Kutub, asserted that modern Arabic dialects were ‘not mere degenerate forms of the classical idiom’, as Arabic scholars had often suggested, but rather languages with histories and lives of their own.\(^\text{14}\)

Further emphasizing the colloquial’s independence, J. Selden Willmore, a British judge in the Cairo Native Court of Appeal, boldly if dubiously asserted that Cairene colloquial Arabic had closer affinities to Hebrew and Aramaic than to the Arabic of the Qur’an. (Willmore was perhaps evincing the kind of ‘fantasmic representation of authoritative certainty in the face of spectacular ignorance’, which was a hallmark of colonial linguistics).\(^\text{15}\) Willmore further averred that Cairene Arabic deserved to be a language of literature and warned that unless Arabs adopted a simpler written language (closer to the vernacular), Arabic as a whole ‘would be gradually ousted, as the intercourse with European nations increases, by a foreign tongue’.\(^\text{16}\) Meanwhile, Daniel Willard Fiske, an American literary scholar (and expert on the Icelandic sagas and Dante) championed Arabic typographical reform and the widespread application of Spitta’s Romanised alphabet, calling the Arabic script itself a kind of educational and visual ‘torture’.\(^\text{17}\) By the time missionaries began to promote colloquial Arabic printing in the first years of the twentieth century, they were able to join this small but vocal chorus.

Missionaries and the Barely Literate: Colloquial Arabic’s Appeal

Upon arriving in Egypt, British and American missionaries devoted years to Arabic study, even as they pursued their routine of evangelistic, educational, medical or administrative work. For many, learning Arabic was an ongoing struggle. One missionary, for example, described it as a looming mountain to be crossed, and remarked that the humbling and discouraging experience of five years of ‘plodding’ in

\(^\text{16}\) J. Selden Willmore, *The Spoken Arabic of Egypt* (London 1901), viii, xii.
\(^\text{17}\) Fiske, *An Egyptian Alphabet*, 25.

Arabic study had forced him into ‘a deeper devotional life in order to keep up good-cheer’.\(^\text{18}\)

Originally, missionaries had formally studied only Classical Arabic (here implying a focus on early and medieval Islamic texts) and were expected to pick up the colloquial in the course of daily work. That approach began to change in 1912, when W.H.T. Gairdner, a prominent member of the British Church Missionary Society (more commonly known as the CMS), decided that he should teach new missionaries not the literary Arabic of the Qur’an, but rather the spoken language of ordinary Cairenes: this, he felt, would be more practical and immediately useful. Gairdner’s efforts to analyse and teach this language culminated in a textbook that he published in 1917, simply titled *Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*. Emphasising the development of daily conversational skills, his book appeared in later editions and also provided the model for other colloquial Arabic textbooks, such as one devised by missionaries for use in the northern Sudan.\(^\text{19}\) In the words of his biographer, Gairdner had ‘discovered that, far from being only a rather slovenly and degraded form of the written tongue, [colloquial Cairene Arabic] was a living language following very exact grammatical and phonetical rules of its own’.\(^\text{20}\) In other words, Gairdner’s research into Arabic dialectology led him to feel the same kind of admiration for the colloquial that Spitta, Vollers, Willmore and others had earlier expressed.

In 1922, five years after Gairdner’s book appeared, an interdenominational group of American missionaries convened in Cairo to survey the Christian literature available for Muslim audiences and to suggest plans for future development. ‘One common fact at once emerges’, they wrote in their report, ‘The Moslem World is learning to read.’ They noted that more Muslims were attending schools, that literacy rates were rising, and that demand was growing among educated males for technical books, encyclopaedias, and even cheap detective stories.\(^\text{21}\)

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19 W.H.T. Gairdner, *Egyptian Colloquial Arabic: A Conversation Grammar and Reader* (Cambridge 1917); other revised editions were published in 1926 and posthumously in 1944 and 1953. This book was the model for R.S. Macdonald and Mary Wright (comp.) ‘Da Kitz’ A Sudanese Colloquial Grammar, ed. J. Spencer Tringham (Cairo 1939).
Printing and Publishing in the Middle East

But they also sounded a cautionary note, observing that many Muslims were learning how to read little more than the Arabic alphabet. They identified a growing class of people 'who, through the spread of education, have had enough schooling to teach them the phonetic values of the Arabic alphabet, but who, as they mouth out their syllables, fail to get the sense of what they read in classical Arabic, because they have not gone far enough to learn the literary vocabulary'. To cater to this 'great and populous borderland between literacy and illiteracy', the American missionaries advocated printing simple illustrated texts that would use the colloquial language.23

In 1925, a British woman missionary supported a similar venture. 'Moslem lands today', she wrote, 'with the modern increase of primary education, have a new population of half-readers or stuttering readers who cannot attain to the glories of high literature, but who are, like all normal human beings, hungry for stories'.24

The Goals and Achievements of the Missionaries' Colloquial Printing

In the early 1920s, therefore, British and American missionaries began to promote the development of printed colloquial Arabic materials, sometimes pooling their efforts to do so. Five points can summarize their aims and motives in these endeavours.

The first and most basic point is that missionaries wanted to evangelize among Muslims, and believed that they could reach out to the illiterate and barely literate masses by printing texts in the language spoken by humble people. Female missionaries were especially eager to reach out to women, including those who lived in relative seclusion, but female literacy rates were minute in the early twentieth-century Arab world — thus making colloquial materials seem especially useful for women's evangelical work.25

Second, Protestants believed that men and women should be able to read, understand, and personally interpret the Bible in the vernacular — that is, in the

22 For a recent study of the Bible and its languages, see Daniel G.7. 8.
24 On missions and women in the Islamic world, see, for example, Annie von Summer and Samuel M. Zwemer, Daylight in the Harem (Edinburgh 1917); Caroline M. Buchanan, 'Movements in the Life of Women in the Islamic World: The Near and Middle East', in Mott (ed.) The Moslem World of Today, 209-27; Gülü Francie-Delgani, 'CMS Women Missionaries in Persia: Perceptions of Muslim Women and Islam, 1884-1934', in Kevin Waite and Brian Stanley (eds), The Church Mission Society and World Christianity, 1790-1999 (Richmond 2000), 91-119.
25 The Wycliffe Organization of Bible translators and its affiliate, SIL International (formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics) continue to promote Bible translations on the grounds that all languages are gifts of God and 'every language deserves to see its language in print and to have some literature written in it'. Linguistic Creed of SIL International at http://www.sil.org/sil/linguistic.creed.htm (Accessed December 31, 2002).
education was creating an educated class that was highly proficient in French but weak in classical Arabic. \(^{29}\) Moreover, colloquial Arabic supporters frequently compared the Arabic faṣḥā to Latin and the ḍāmmiyah to Italian, suggesting that the former was stilted, monobound, and on its way to extinction and that the latter was vibrant and modern. \(^{30}\)

A fifth and final motive is that few Christian missionaries knew literary Arabic well or felt confident with the Classical texts they had studied, but on the contrary learned colloquial Arabic while interacting with patients in clinics, children in schools, and so on. Conversant in and comfortable with everyday Arabic speech, missionaries welcomed the idea of printing materials in a simple conversational medium that they themselves could understand. The lack of literary Arabic language skills may have been especially pronounced among women, many of whom served on short-term missionary contracts or came in their capacity as wives (in the latter case often doing mission work along with their husbands but without being treated, or paid, as official missionaries). \(^{31}\) Indeed, although women were increasingly important to the missionary enterprise of the period, they seldom pursued work of Islamic or Arabic scholarship. \(^{32}\)

These were the motives that prompted missionaries to call for the printing of colloquial Arabic materials. However, assessing their colloquial output is difficult because their printed materials, intended for the semi-literate and therefore the non-powerful, appear to have been ephemeral and rarely if ever made their way into the libraries and other scholarly institutions that preserve the high culture of intellectuals.

\(^{29}\) American Committee on ... Christian Literature for Moslems, *The Power of the Printed Page*, 51.


\(^{32}\) An exception was the British missionary-scholar Constance E. Padwick, who was affiliated to the Nile Mission Press in Cairo. Padwick produced two biographical works on British missionaries to Muslims as well as a study of Muslim prayer-manuals, which remains in print today. Constance E. Padwick, *Temple Guardian of Cairo* (1929); Henry Martyn: *Confessor of the Faith* (London 1922), and *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (London 1961; Oxford 1996).
orthography and typography. However, in at least one case — in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan — British missionaries in the early 1930s consciously chose to render the Arabic colloquial in the Latin alphabet and in this manner published a textbook for teaching Nuba children how to read. In this Nuba Mountains case, missionaries believed or hoped that ‘Romanised Arabic’ would thwart the spread of Islam among people who were still practicing traditional religions by propagating a form of literacy that would nevertheless cut its users off from mainstream Arabic texts. Their behaviour was characteristic of a period when Christian missionaries regarded Islam as an arch-enemy battling for African souls.

Finally, there was another important genre of colloquial Arabic book that missionaries actively published: namely, textbooks targeting English-speaking audiences of missionaries, colonial officials, and assorted other expatriates who needed or wanted to learn the everyday language. Most of these textbooks used a combination of Arabic and Latin typeface for rendering the colloquial. Gairdner’s 1912 volume was the pacesetter but others followed, such as the Egyptian Colloquial Arabic Reader (1927), by the American Presbyterian missionary Earl Edgar Elder.

The Demise of Colloquial Printing

The heyday of colloquial Arabic printing was brief, occurring in the interwar period of the 1920s and '30s. Missionaries’ enthusiasm for developing a colloquial Arabic literature diminished as they gradually downgraded or abandoned their plans for evangelising among Muslim peoples. Various shifts were occurring in mission thought, Arab societies, and global politics to bring about this change in priorities. Three relevant trends stand out here.

First, by the 1930s, mainline American and British Protestant organizations were beginning to lose some of the optimism, militancy, and cultural arrogance which had convinced church leaders of an earlier generation that rapid, worldwide, mass evangelisation was both possible and desirable. Perhaps the book which best exemplified this new soul-searching was Re-thinking Missions after One Hundred Years, published in the United States and undertaken by a ‘Laymen’s Foreign Missions Inquiry’ in 1932.40

Second, Christian missionaries throughout the Islamic world were beginning to reckon with the fact that relatively few Muslims had converted despite their years of vigorous efforts. Pressure was mounting within missions to redirect limited resources and energies into areas where Christianity was expanding dramatically, notably, in sub-Saharan Africa.41 Financial pressure became especially acute in the 1930s as the Depression eroded foreign mission budgets.

Third, with the collapse of the British and French empires in the Middle East after World War II, Christian missionaries lost the protection of the foreign powers which had allowed them to pursue their aims on the ground without much regard for Muslim sentiment. After decolonisation, Christian missionaries knew that they would be remaining in the Middle East only at the sufferance of Muslim governments and that to evangelise among Muslims would be to risk wholesale expulsion.42 In the years ahead foreign Christian organizations in the Arab world abandoned or de-emphasized their religious mission while continuing to provide social services, or refocused their attention onto local Christian minorities and expatriates.43 At the same time, the actions that some postcolonial governments took to nationalize missionary schools — for example, in Egypt and Sudan in the late 1950s — sharply curtailed missionary options.44 In this context some Christian thinkers began to emphasize the idea of cultural encounter and exchange in their relations with Muslims, thereby participating

41 Consider the case of northern Sudan during the Anglo-Egyptian period (1898-1956) where CMS missionaries gained only one Muslim convert during fifty years of work. Their colleagues in southern Sudan, by contrast, sponsored conversions by the score. Sharkey, ‘Christians among Muslims’.
43 For example, regarding the balancing act performed by the American University in Cairo vis-a-vis the Egyptian government after the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the Free Officers coup of 1952, see Lawrence R. Murphy, The American University in Cairo: 1919–1987 (Cairo 1987).
44 Regarding Egypt, see, for example: Sobhī Muḥammad Sobhī, Copts and Muslims: A Study on Harmony and Hostility (Leicester 1991), 44-5. Regarding Sudan, where the nationalization of missionary schools had a major impact on the southern region, see, for example, John O. Voll, ‘Imperialism, Nationalism, and Missionaries: Lessons from Sudan for the Twenty-First Century’, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 8:1 (1997), 39–52.
in what the next generation of theologians began to describe as the interfaith dialogue movement.45

In any case, by the 1950s, colloquial Arabic appeared doomed as a print language. Pan-Arab ideals were flourishing, and standard literary Arabic was providing critical cultural ground for transcending national boundaries. Standard literary Arabic arguably became the most important platform of Arab identity as formalized by membership in the Arab League, which grew after 1945 to embrace not only the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent but also the whole of northern Africa.

In the late twentieth century, the dramatic expansion of state-sponsored education made the Arabic fus Nh more widely accessible still, even as substantial segments within Arab countries — for example, more than half the female populations of Egypt and Morocco — remained unable to read and write.46 Against this context, the colloquial enjoyed only limited applications in print. Some novelists, for example, rendered the ‘Arabiyya in dialogue to convey a setting or to suggest a character’s class or ethnic background,47 while some poets (building upon centuries-old local traditions of Arabic oral poetry) composed verse in dialect in an attempt to reach out to audiences beyond the elites while signalling their social commitment. However, this ‘Arabiyya tendency to gain more recognition as folk art than as work of high cultural merit, reflecting the fus Nh’s continued paramountcy as the expected language of literary expression.48


The Arab Rejection of the ‘Arabiyya

Ultimately, colloquial printing failed to catch on, less because of the collapse of missionary willpower and financing, and much more because native Arabic-speakers mounted sustained opposition to the idea of elevating the colloquial as a literary language. Strikingly, the colloquial faced resistance from both the Arabic literati and the moderately educated, and among both Muslims and local Christians.

In a 1964 study, the Egyptian historian Naflis Zakariyya Sa‘id traced the history of the European and American bid (da‘wa) to promote the colloquial Arabic language in Egypt after 1880 and adamantly rejected it. ‘The call to take the colloquial as a tool for literary expression’, she wrote, ‘and its displacement (iqtihad) of the Arabic fus Nh … exposed Arabic expression to the most violent crisis that it has known during its long history’ … and formed part of a ‘biased imperialist call’ aiming toward the elimination or extermination (ṣirāj ‘āthi) of the literary Arabic.49 She asserted that men like the British judge J. Selden Willmore, who supported the literary adoption of the colloquial rendered in Latin print, had an inner desire ‘to realize one of the goals of British Imperialism, namely the separation of Muslims and Arabs from their past and the destruction (talif) of their linguistic unity …’. Such Westerners were aiming for the cultural dispossession (θηβαί) of the Arabs, ‘but the Egyptians caught on’ to their scheme.50

Some of Egypt’s most distinguished literati shared this vehement opposition to the colloquial agenda. Taha Husayn averred that ‘the colloquial lacks the qualities to make it worthy of the name of a language’, and expressed hope that with the cultural elevation of the masses, its corrupt forms would disappear. The Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz was bolder still; describing colloquial Arabic as a sickness, he declared, ‘I consider the colloquial one of the failings of our society, exactly like ignorance, poverty and disease’.51

Reflecting on Egyptian attitudes toward the Arabic language at the end of the twentieth century, the socio-linguist Nilofar Haeri noted that Egyptians from across the educational spectrum assigned tremendous cultural value to the Arabic fus Nh, often regardless of their level of mastery in this medium or even of their likelihood to

50 Ibid., 25–6, 37.
use it in writing or formal speech. Egyptians variously described the fiṣḥā as an emblem of Arab or Islamic cultural authenticity, as an expressive vehicle for building Arab unity, and as a tool for counteracting foreign domination or the legacies of colonialism and the Christian missionaries. With regard to language policies in particular, some Egyptian intellectuals (along with other Arab scholars) expressed their mistrust of European and American attempts to promote colloquial Arabic and pointed to possible ulterior motives, above all secularisation, Westernisation, and fragmentation — the last an inevitable consequence of any system that would promote local ‘immunity’ dialects over the trans-regional fiṣḥā.  

These concerns and suspicions have had an impact on scholarship insofar as they have tended to leave the scholarly field of dialectology — the linguistic study of local Arabic dialects — to foreign (i.e. non-Arab) linguists. A recent Arabic study on the historical emergence and development of the Arabic dialects, written by Abd al-Ghaffar Hilal, a dean at Cairo’s al-Azhar University, is no exception to this pattern. Hilal praises God for revealing the Qur’an in Arabic and emphasizes the role of the Qur’an — and of the scholars who studied it — in setting a linguistic standard for unifying the otherwise fragmented and dispersed Arab peoples during the Islamic era. He describes the Islamic grammarians and philologists of past centuries as language guardians who tried to guide the masses toward ‘exemplary Arabic’ (al-‘arabīyya al-nami’dhajīyya) and to purge the language of colloquial influences that would have otherwise weakened its unifying force.  

While many Muslims cherish the fiṣḥā because of its connections to the language of the Qur’an, Christian Arabs have favoured the fiṣḥā for literary and religious expression as well, regarding it as an elegant and prestigious language and as a dignifying medium. Of course, many missionaries also appreciated its power in rendering Bible translations. This was the case with the American missionary to Syria, C.V.A. Van Dyck, who strove in the late nineteenth century to produce a fresh Arabic fiṣḥā translation of the New Testament, which would be sufficiently graceful in its language to appeal to both Muslims and Christians, from Casablanca to Baghdad, while being suitable for evangelistic and educational work as well as for regular

worship. Van Dyck’s final product was deemed so successful that the American Bible Society and British & Foreign Bible Society agreed to circulate his text jointly in what one church historian describes as a ‘landmark’ of co-operation between Christian Bible societies.  

In the early twentieth century Christian missionaries did attempt to translate portions of the Bible into Arabic dialects, but did not produce full versions in the colloquial, perhaps because audiences were not receptive. Consider the Sudan, where Egyptian Christians helped missionaries to translate portions of the Bible into Sudanese Arabic: these efforts resulted in 1927 in the publication of a Latin-print colloquial Arabic version of the Book of Mark, and in 1955 in an Arabic-script colloquial version of the Book of Luke. Attempting to explain why these colloquial versions never caught on among Sudanese Christian converts, a Bible historian wrote in 1998: ‘On the whole Arabic speakers still have a resistance to writing the colloquial language or to using the colloquial language for literature held in any sort of esteem. Folk tales, yes; dialect poetry, yes; but a book of sacred import such as the Bible should be dignified in its language and therefore only the Classical or Literary Arabic is worthy’. Clearly unaware of the early twentieth-century history of Romanised Arabic among missionaries who hoped it would thwart the spread of Islam, this writer speculated that the colloquial translation of Mark may have been rendered in Latin print ‘because it was felt by Sudanese [Christians] that the colloquial language was not worthy of the [Arabic] script ....’ Instead, Arabic-speaking Protestants in the Sudan used Van Dyck’s Arabic fiṣḥā translation of the Bible, notwithstanding some of its archaic-sounding vocabulary.  

The Sudanese experience suggests that colloquial Arabic may have been a stepping stone for the barely literate, but that learners aspired to more. Proper literacy remained standard Arabic literacy — fiṣḥā in Arabic script.

53 Ibid., 64.  
57 Ibid., 17.
Conclusion: Missionary Legacies and the Impact of Colloquial Printing

The missionary experiment in developing colloquial Arabic literature was short in duration and limited in scope and yet it nevertheless had a social impact. Above all, it fuelled continuing debates and controversies about Arabic educational policies, the role of the Arabic language in maintaining an Arab-Islamic heritage and identity, and the historical legacies of Christian missionary work among the Arab peoples.

To emphasize the positive while assessing the educational import of the missionary experiment, one could argue the following: In devising a colloquial Arabic literature for the barely literate, missionaries prioritised the educational needs of marginalized groups, including women and the poor, at a time when only privileged social groups had access to rigorous education in standard literary Arabic. In doing so, missionaries were pioneers in two fields: first, in the development of children's literature, that is, of printed materials catering especially to the needs and interests of the young; and second, in the pedagogy of literacy for adults. That is, missionaries recognized that there is a spectrum of literacies and developed materials to help minimally literate adults maintain and perhaps extend their skills.

Yet missionary efforts in colloquial Arabic printing were undeniably part of a larger evangelical project that occurred under the aegis of Western imperialism. Understood thus, Christian missionaries had a very negative long-term impact insofar as they seeded an enduring legacy of ill will among many Arab Muslims and arguably prompted them to adopt their own version of the Christian-Muslim ‘clash of civilizations’ worldview. Evidence of lingering resentment surfaces in a late twentieth-century Arabic genre of anti-missionary treatises. Written by a multinational assortment of Muslim Arab thinkers (including Lebanese, Egyptians, Saudis and others) these works stress the cultural threat that Christian evangelism and Western culture has posed to Islamic societies in an era of European and later American imperialism.58

Several accusations recur in these Arabic writings. Their authors argue, for example, that Christian missionaries demeaned and demoralized Muslims by

denigrating their heritage; that they fomented sectarian conflicts, notably in Lebanon; that they contributed to the political mood among British colonizers that facilitated the Zionist appropriation of Palestine; and significantly for the history of Arabic printing and language study, that they undermined pan-Arab unity by promoting the codification of variant colloquial Arabic writing systems. According to many of these authors, missionary schools and hospitals masqueraded as charity but in fact carried out cultural assaults, by secularizing and westernizing those they claimed to serve. Despite their efforts and ruses, one of these writers asserted in the 1990s, the missionaries ‘made a mistake, because Islam is a tall building which no one can destroy’.59 These last words, apparently an allusion to the 1993 bombing attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, serve as a reminder that the history of Christian missionaries in the Middle East remains politically charged, and that the history of their efforts in printing and language reform is inextricably bound to larger controversies involving cultural interaction and conflict.


59 Muṣṭafā Fawżī 'Abd al-Lālī, Ghāzī, al-Hiyā fī al-Ashāb al-Muḥāshībihūn fī al-Dal'ān iillā al-Tahāthī (n.p., n.d.), 6. I read this book in the library of the American University in Cairo in July, 2001 — less than two months before the September 11th attacks in the United States. Its rhetoric against ‘Jewish Cruelty’ institutions (p. 69) — a category into which it places the United Nations — is evocative of the discourse of the so-called Qā'idā network. The book also targets the American University in Cairo itself. Referring to the university’s early twentieth-century missionary roots, it declares: ‘There is no argument about it, the American University in Cairo was and still is a center for Christianisation to a dangerous extent’ (p. 29).