

## Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb and American Orientalism

*Muhammed Alexander Russell Webb ve Amerikan Oryantalizm*  
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### Özet

Amerikan Müslüman tarihinde Muhammed Alexander Russell Webb'in İslâmî misyonu iç savaştan önceki yüzyılın köleleştirilmiş Afrikalı müslümanları ile XX. Yüzyılın ilk dönemlerindeki yarı-İslâmî grupların yükselişe geçtikleri iki dönem arasında ABD'ye gelmiştir. Muhammed Webb'in konferansları, yayınladığı risaleler ve kitapları onun İslam'a olan yolculuğuna ve düşüncelerine dair pek çok bilgi barındırmaktadır. Webb'in müslüman olma hikayesi, Amerika'daki İslâmî misyonu 1890'lı yıllarında medyanın güncel konuları arasında olmasına rağmen Webb arkasında kalıcı bir hareket veya enstitüler bırakmamış ve Müslüman Amerikalıların tarihinin diğer dönemleri arasında bir bağlantı kurmamıştır. Bu yüzden onun geride bıraktığı ilmi miras uzunca bir dönem gözlerden kaçmıştır. Webb'in vefatından yaklaşık beş yıl önce "İslam'ın Elçisi" lakabıyla tanınan Samuel Marinus Zwemer (Amerikalı Protestan misyoner), Webb'in *the Moslem World* gazetesini aynı isimle yayınlamaya başlar. Fakat bu gazete Müslümanların aleyhine tamamıyla misyonerliğe adanmıştır. Bu makalede New York'un Hudson kasabasında dünyaya gelen Muhammed Alexander Russell Webb'in (1846-1916) yaşadığı dönemde İslam karşıtı ortaya çıkan fikir ve düşüncelere karşı verdiği mücadeleler ele alınmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İslam, Oryantalizm, Avrupa Merkezçilik, İslam Karşıtı Düşünceler, Hıristiyanların Polemikleri.

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**Abstract**

*Research concerning late nineteenth-century American Muslim history has been dominated by the study of one central figure, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb. His Indian-backed Islamic mission to America is regarded as the first, and consequently the most significant, movement of its time. Webb's speeches, pamphlets, and books frequently drew attention to his spiritual journey to Islam. Although the story of Webb's conversion and Islamic mission in America were hot items in the early 1890s press, Webb faded quickly from public memory, and his legacy long remained hidden below academic radar. Five years before Webb's death, Samuel Zwemer established a Protestant missionary journal bearing the same title as Webb's journal, the *Moslem World*, but it was dedicated to diametrically opposing goals. This article seeks to assess Islam's place within American religious history by examining the life and work of a remarkable 19<sup>th</sup> century American figure, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, a white Muslim convert who challenged the prevailing anti-Islamic sentiments of his time. Refuting previously undisputed myths, Webb's aim wasn't to proselytize his religion, but to demonstrate to his fellow representatives, as well as the American public, that their concepts of Islam as a violent, non-progressive religion, intolerant women, were unfounded.*

**Keywords:** *Islam, Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Anti-Islamic Sentiment, Christian polemics.*

### **An American Orientalist: Samuel Marinus Zwemer**

Orientalism which is a perception or mindset for viewing cultures and peoples territorially, culturally or physically different has been deeply embedded in Western discourse vis a vis what it defines as the ‘Orient.’ While the roots of it can be traced from perhaps the very first interaction between the West and the Orient, it survives and thrives to this day.

In the late nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, the small field of Islamic studies was mostly intertwined with Semitic or Biblical studies and with missionary activities and interests in general in the United States. The leading experts on Islamic studies in the early twentieth century were missionaries who, although much more sympathetic to and informed of their subject of study than the medieval Christian polemicists, were on the whole in pursuit of similar objectives, namely to search in Islam for a truncated versions of Christianity.

Meanwhile, critical and adversarial attitudes toward Islam also surfaced in the writings of missionary scholars who cultivated reputations as experts on Islam and affiliated themselves with universities and theological colleges.

One of the most prominent and strident of these was Samuel M. Zwemer (1867-1952), a famous missionary and founder of the Hartford Theological Seminary, an American minister of the Dutch Reformed Church who established missions in Iraq and Bahrain, organized international missionary conferences, founded and edited the journal *The Moslem World*, and published several books including, for example, a study of the Islamic apostasy principle which deterred easy conversion to Christianity. In a book entitled *A Moslem Seeker after God: Showing Islam at its Best in the Life and Teaching of al-Ghazali, Mystic and Theologian of the Eleventh Century*, Zwemer writes: “There is a real sense in which al-Ghazali may be used as a schoolmaster to lead Moslems to Christ... By striving to understand al-Ghazali we may at least better fit ourselves to help those who, like him, are earnest seekers after God amid the twilight shadows Islam.” This is the extent of sympathy which marks this strand of thinking which allows Muslims

a possibility of redemption through conversion to Christianity, from other strands in Orientalism.<sup>2</sup>

Zwemer consistently portrayed Islam as a fanatical, backward faith that was incompatible with modernity, and predicted its ultimate collapse. Like all other non-Christian systems and philosophies, he wrote, Islam is a dying religion. Declaring that when the crescent wanes the Cross will prove dominant, Zwemer averred that successful Christian evangelization was imminent.<sup>3</sup> Zwemer also supported intensifying Christian missionary activity in Islamic countries by citing Reverend George E. Post's proposal.

“The Church of Christ must deal with these spiritual aspects. We must meet Pan-Islamism with Pan-Evangelism. “It is fight for life. We have got to conquer them or they will conquer us. There are unknown possibilities in that great continent. Who knows what the forces of Central Asia may yet do in the future? Hear the parable of the locusts. When the locust appears in the desert he is at home. He is contented usually with its barrenness. He lays his eggs in the sand. He hatches his young and they eat the bitter and unpalatable herbs that grow in the few moist spots of the wilderness; but, at certain times, under the influence of unknown causes which science cannot fathom, these locusts take upon them to fly over the cultivated fields and the fair provinces of the empire. At such a time there is nothing for the farmer to do but to go out and find the places where have laid their eggs in the soil. They dig a hole a few inches in depth and they deposit a bag containing over a hundred eggs. Every egg is a locust and every locust can produce one hundred eggs, and these locusts sweep like a devouring prairie-fire all over the country, leaving nothing but dead vegetation and wailing men behind them. We must go down to the locust's home; we must go into Arabia; we must

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2 Samuel Zwemer, *A Moslem Seeker after God: Showing Islam at its Best in the Life and Teaching of al-Ghazali, Mystic and Theologian of the Eleventh Century*. Zwemer's other books include *The Law of Apostasy in Islam: answering the Question why there are so few Moslem converts, and Giving Examples of Their Moral courage and martyrdom*; and *The Disintegration of Islam*. On Zwemer's career see Heather Sharkey, “Christians among Muslims: The Church Missionary Society in the Northern Sudan,” *Journal of African History* 43 (2002) pp.51-75.

3 Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Disintegration of Islam*, New York, 1916, pp. 7, 9-10.

go into Sudan; we must go into Central Asia; and we must go Christianize these people or they will march over their deserts, and they will sweep like a fire that shall devour our Christianity and destroy it.”<sup>4</sup>

Such missionary literature effectively marginalized Islam within nineteenth-century America. Samir Amin, author of *Eurocentrism*, provides an invaluable reference to this trend. His theory of Eurocentrism, a key factor behind American hostility towards Islam, identifies this prejudiced attitude as,

aculturalist phenomenon in the sense that it assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as Universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time.<sup>5</sup>

Amin theorizes that although ethnocentrism is common to both Eastern and Western cultures, Eurocentrism is a distinctively Western phenomenon. He stated that Eastern cultures don't permeate Western lands in order to subjugate its inhabitants to their own standards.

This was consistent with Muhammad Alexander R. Webb's observation of Muslim Spain.<sup>6</sup>“The Islam system is designed to cultivate all that is purest and noblest and grandest in the human character. Some people say Islam is impossible in a high state of civilization. Now, that is the result of ignorance. Look at Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when it was the center of all the arts and sciences, when Christian Europe went to Moslem Spain to learn all that there was worth knowing – languages, arts, all the new discoveries were to be found in Moslem Spain, and in Moslem Spain alone. There was no civilization in the world as high as that of Moslem Spain.<sup>7</sup>Here was a rare, if not exceptional, case whe-

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4 Zwemer, *The Moslem World*, pp.184-185.

5 Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, p.vii.

6 Alexander Russell Webb, *Lectures on Islam: Delivered at Different Places in India*, Lahore: Islamia Press, 1893, pp.19, 21-22.

7 Alexander Russell Webb, “The Spirit of Islam,” in *Neely's History of the Par-*

re East had conquered West, Webb noted, and still the local Christian populace was not prevent from going about its way of worship. Webb argued that Islam constituted living proof of the truths underlying all religions. Not only Christians were granted religious freedom, but also many chose to study and employ the arts and sciences that accompanied the conquering Moors.<sup>8</sup>

Webb's detractors, as well as other Christian missionaries of the nineteenth-century, exemplified Amin's definition of Eurocentric behavior. Zwemer, for example, portrayed Muslims as the illiterate masses of the East. He prescribed a Western solution to their social condition, citing as role models "those relatively few Moslems who received a liberal education in government or mission schools, or who became enamored with Western civilization, have revolted against the old Islam. This clash of modern life and thought with medievalism gave birth to the new Islam."<sup>9</sup>

Webb's confrontation of this prejudice at its historical point was significant. During this era, not only Christian missionaries, but "impartial" scholars of religions discharged their anti-Islamic rhetoric to an unquestioning American audience. Webb's Islamic mission was an inadvertent by-product of the extensive and powerful Christian missionary movements that flourished throughout the imperial domains of nineteenth-century colonialism. Western colonial presence in Eurasia and Africa empowered the church carry its message forcefully to "the heathen," but unwittingly generated a converse response among Muslims, who formed their own Islamic movements organized along Christian mission lines.<sup>10</sup>

An even more specific analysis of Western impressions of the Eastern mind-set is presented by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said asserted that

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*liament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition: Compiled from Original Manuscripts and Stenographic Reports*, ed., Walter Raleigh Houghton, Chicago: Frank Tennyson Neely, 1893, p.461

8 Webb, *Lectures on Islam*, pp.21-24.

9 Zwemer, *The Moslem World*, p.125.

10 Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p.162.

Westerners viewed themselves as intellectually and morally superior to the populace of the Eastern hemisphere. Here again, a twentieth-century scholar's hindsight confirms Webb's crucial observation. In demonstrating the Westerners' belief in this dichotomy, Said quoted Lord Cromer, a British administrator of Egypt in the nineteenth-century, as saying,

Sir Alfred Lyall once said to me: "Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind. Every Anglo Indian should always remember that maxim." Want of accuracy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind.

The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature skeptical (sic) and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in a somewhat higher degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty. They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Said concluded that most Westerners viewed Orientals as non-progressive, naïve, simple-minded and generally inferior to themselves. Such attitudes reflective of Orientalism were rampant in the era's missionary publications. In the chapter titled, "Social and Moral Evils of Islam," Zwemer attributed the purported ignorance and superstition of the Muslim world by alleging that

Even among the leaders of education modern science is despised or feared, and everything turns, on the Ptolemaic system, round the little world of the Koran. Jinn are exorcised; witches and the evil-eye avoided by amulets and talismans; alchemy and astrology are diligently studied; and all sorts of quackery

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11 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978, p.38.

and bigotry flourish in the soil of ignorance.<sup>12</sup>

Said's analysis of Orientalism and its impact also provides another key insight. In examining nineteenth-century Christian scholars, he pinpoints a significant element that affected their understanding of Islam. Said noted that

“One constraint acting upon Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam was an analogical one; since Christ is the basis of Christian faith, it was assumed – quite incorrectly – that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity. Hence the polemic name “Mohammedanism” given to Islam, and the automatic epithet “imposter” applied to Mohammed.<sup>13</sup> Out of such and many other misconceptions “there formed a circle which was never broken by imaginative exteriorization... The Christian concept of Islam was integral and self-sufficient.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite claims of being versed in the Islamic doctrine, Zwemer seemed to believe that in Islam, Mohammed filled the role of savior. He wrote, “Mohammed holds the keys of heaven and hell. No Moslem, however bad his character, will perish finally; no unbeliever, however good his life, can be saved, except through Mohammed... The Religion which Mohammed founded bears everywhere the imprint of his life and character. Mohammed was not only the prophet, but the prophecy of Islam.”<sup>15</sup> The tendency of Westerners to view Mohammed's status in Islam as redeemer accounts in part for their inability to grasp the true difference between Christianity and Islam. Indeed, Zwemer decried Mohammed as a “false prophet,” and Wherry referred to him as an “impostor.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Answering Orientalists Claims by Webb**

Historically speaking, the first native born American Muslim was Mu-

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12 Zwemer, *The Moslem World*, p.122-123.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p.60. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh: University Press, 1960, p.33; James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1964.

14 Daniel, *Ibid*, p.252.

15 Zwemer, *The Moslem World*, pp.24-25.

16 Zwemer, *The Moslem World*, p.xiii; Rev. E.M. Wherry, *Islam; or, The Religion of the Turk*, New York: American Tract Society, 1896, p.8.



hammad Alexander Russell Webb, a former American consular officer in Manila, Philippines. Prior to his conversion to Islam in 1888, Mr. Webb studied extensively the writings of philosophers and sages from the Orient.<sup>17</sup> Islam apparently struck a responsive chord in his soul and he decided to embrace the teachings of the Qur'an. Writing much later in *Islam in America* (1893), he described his spiritual pilgrimage to Islam and the odds against which he struggled in planting the seed of Islam in America. He started in the same year a publication called the *Moslem World*, which is indeed the mother of all modern Islamic literature in North America.

This American diplomat's conversion to Islam coincided with the arrival of the Muslim immigrants, and it is quite probable that the present Islamic movement owes much to the confluence of the immigrant and native efforts at Islamic Dawah. Regardless of what future historians of the Islamic Movement in America will say, the fact remains that Webb's conversion set the precedence for future White Americans to discover and search for the meaning of life in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an. He also pioneered the Islamic press in America, and Muslim editors of our times cannot but recount events relating to his life with admiration and wonderment. He was truly ahead of his time!

In order to understand Webb's significance to the history of Islam in American religious history, it is necessary to assess his life and work. It is also important to examine his goals and external challenges he faced as a nineteenth-century American advocate for Islam. Mohammed Webb endeavored to correct the prevailing misperceptions of Islam in the United States during period in which American intolerance towards Islam was at peak levels due to anti-Islamic propaganda published by Christian missionaries. The predominantly Orientalistic conviction was that the intellectual and moral caliber of the Christian West far surpassed that of Islamic East. Most religious scholars of the day believed that the social and moral vices of the world could and should be remedied through the universal application of Christianity. Their bias towards Christianity hindered their objective ability to note Webb's

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17 See Emory H. Tunison, "Mohammad Webb, First American Muslim," *The Arab World*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (1945) pp. 13-18.

significance and that of Islam's appearance within the broader scope of American religious pluralism. Few historical sources reference Webb and his work.

But if Mr. Webb was a man of learning and worldwide travels, who found in Islam the spiritual medicine for an American society troubled by the agonies of the receding Victorian Age, many of his contemporaries and successors who then or later encountered Islam or some form of Islamic teachings were not that fortunate in American life.

Webb's role is crucial to the history of Islam in nineteenth century America because the problems he encountered and addressed, particularly, American misunderstanding of and hostility towards Muslims, are still pertinent today. Although he provided sound arguments that he supported with scholarly sources, the anti-Islamic disposition of the American culture was so deeply ingrained at all levels that Webb's work went virtually unnoted. He slipped into obscurity. Had scholars previously examined Webb's life, work, and philosophy, perceptions and accounts of the history of Islam in American religious history might be different.

Muhammad Webb's task of educating his countrymen about Islam and its culture, then, was met with strong and vocal Christian resistance. Among the most outspoken critics were the nineteenth-century missionaries who wrote various books and journals on the vices of Islam. Samuel Zwemer's 1908 diatribe *The Moslem World* such an example. In his missionary journal, Zwemer, like many other Western authors on Islam, attempted to "educate" Americans about religion and its followers. Many Christians in the United States referred to his book for information on Islamic teachings. Islam, by Zwemer's account contained numerous inherent pitfalls. He warned that the Qur'an prescribed certain social evils such as polygamy, legal status of women, jihad, and slavery, and that Islam fostered loose morals among its adherents.

Webb's response to Orientalism can be found in his book, *Islam in America*. It is important to note that in attempting to counter these biases, Webb issued anti-Christian sentiment. Despite his aim to educate the predominantly Christian segment of the American population about the practices and principles of Islam, his polemic rhetoric was,

no doubt, counter-productive to reaching and enlightening his audience. Among the many perceptions Webb sought to correct was the parallel that Christians often drew between their savior of Christ and the Muslim example and model of Mohammed. He explained that, for Muslims, salvation depends not upon a divine intercessor but the individual, in that,

With this spirit of resignation to the will of God is inculcated the idea of individual responsibility, that every man is responsible not to this man or that man, or the other man, but responsible to God for every thought and act of his life. He must pay for every act that he commits; he is rewarded for every thought he thinks. There is no mediator, there is no priesthood, there is no ministry.<sup>18</sup>

Among the many other Orientalists charges leveled against Islam in nineteenth-century America, the moniker, “religion of the sword,” was perhaps the most prevalent and definitive among nineteenth-century Americans by Webb’s estimation. He dedicated an entire chapter of his book, *Islam in America*, to repudiating his misperception by presenting the history of Muslim persecution.<sup>19</sup> Webb attributed this moniker to the Christian lore “that the Prophet went into battle with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, notwithstanding the fact that it has been clearly proven that he never took an active part in any battle.”<sup>20</sup>

Webb argued that such criticism was unjustified, and very improperly without historic evidence. He insisted that the tactics of war employed by Muslims were actually more humane than the tactics utilized by Christians, “Christians are the last people on earth who should bring the charge of bloodshed and cruelty against the followers of any other system, of bloodshed and cruelty against the followers of any other system, for it a well-established fact that no religion known to history has such a horrible sanguinary record as has church Christianity.”<sup>21</sup> In his book, Webb traced “the oppressions, trials and sufferings” of

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18 Alexander Russell Webb, “The Spirit of Islam,” pp.461-462.

19 Alexander Russell Webb, *Islam in America*, “The Moslem Wars Defensive,” New York: Oriental Publishing Co., 1893, pp.54-67.

20 Webb, *Ibid*, p.54.

21 Webb, *Ibid*, p.54.

the Muslim community, particularly their humanitarian conduct during times of war, from the time of the prophet through the Crusades. The severe persecution which Prophet Mohammed and his early converts suffered in Mecca at the hands of their fellow-citizens, the Koreish, is a fact admitted by all historians.<sup>22</sup> He emphasized,

There is not a single instance in the history of Islam during the life of the Prophet, when the Moslems fought for revenge, to impose the faith by force of arms, or to plunder the caravans which passed the city, as has been charged by some prejudiced and untruthful writers.<sup>23</sup>

Webb argued that followers of the Prophet fought only when attacked, and even then it was not until their lives and families were in peril. According to him, their self-defense “The permission to fight was given to the believers, only because they were fought against or were attacked first, and had been wronged and driven from their homes without just cause. This was in full accord with the laws of nations and of nature.”<sup>24</sup> Webb submitted this as evidence of the Muslim’s peaceful nature and to clarify the martial history of the early Muslims, thus contesting the missionaries’ claim of Islamic aggression.

In refuting Christian missionaries’ claim that Islam was ripe with violent and even barbaric tendencies, Webb recounted Christian war crimes by citing the history of the Crusades –

But when the Christian Crusaders entered it (Jerusalem), the brains of young children were dashed against the walls, infants were thrown over the battlements, every woman that could be seized was violated, men were roasted on fires; some were ripped open to see if they had swallowed gold; the Jews were driven into their synagogues, and there burned. About 70,000 people, men, women, and children, were cruelly butchered. And this is the testimony of Christian historians, not Mohammedan.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Webb, *Ibid*, p.55.

23 Webb, *Ibid*, p.64.

24 Webb, *Ibid*, p.64.

25 Webb, *Ibid*, p.48.

Webb maintained that, before accusing Muslim of such atrocities, Christians should consider the blemishes on their own history. He bolstered his claim that Islam demands humanity during times of war by presenting examples of Muslim figures who distinguished themselves by their kindness. He cited the Prophet's display of pious mercy to the inhabitants of Mecca, upon his conquest of the city, where previously, he and his followers had been shunned and persecuted for years. Webb further asserted that the Muslims code of conduct during times of war demanded "humanity, mercy, and kindness" by citing that,

It has been clearly shown that the Prophet, as well as the first Caliph, Abu Baker, repeatedly and emphatically directed the Moslem generals from killing or injuring women, children, and old men, not to destroy the fields of grain or date trees, and to sheathe the sword at once upon the surrender of a city.<sup>26</sup>

Webb noted, too, the Sultan Saladin's act of honor when he presented a gift of snow-laden camels to his enemy, Richard the Lion-Hearted while the monarch suffered from fever. He expressed utmost respect for these men's embodiment of the Islamic principle. The Prophet, he further emphasized, "never advocated, taught, nor consented to propagation of Islam by means of the sword, and that he severely condemned violence and taking of life in any form."<sup>27</sup>In his attempt to further dispel this myth, Webb meticulously cited commentaries by Christian authors on the subject of brutality and intolerance within their own religion. He writes,

"A Christian writer in Chamber's Encyclopedia says: - "One remarkable feature of Moslem rule in Spain deserves mention, as it contrasts them so favorably with the contemporary and subsequent rulers of that country even to the present time, and that is their universal toleration in religious matter." Being a Christian, this writer can hardly be accused of partiality to Islam.

Godfrey Higgins, another writer who can safely be called a 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian at least, says: - "Nothing is so common as to hear the Christian priests abuse the religion of Moham-

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26 Webb, *Ibid*, p.48.

27 Webb, *Ibid*, p.49.

med for its bigotry and intolerance. Wonderful assurance and hypocrisy! Who was it that expelled the Moriscoes from Spain because they would not turn Christians? Who was it that murdered the millions of Mexico and Peru, and gave them all away slaves because they were not Christians? What a contrast have the Mohammedans exhibited in Greece! For many centuries the Christians have been permitted to live in the peaceable possession of their properties, their religion, their priests, bishops, patriarchs and churches; and the war between the Greeks and Turks was no more waged on account of religion than was the war between the negroes in Demarara and the English... Whenever the Caliphs conquered, if the inhabitants turned Mohammedans, they were instantly on a footing of perfect equality with the conquerors."... "In all the history of Caliphs there cannot be shown anything half so infamous as the Inquisition, nor a single instance of an individual burnt for his religious opinions; nor, do I believe, put to death in a time of peace for simply not embracing Islam."<sup>28</sup>

Besides arguing against the missionaries' claim that Islam was a hostile and aggressive religion, Webb defended the much-assailed character of the Prophet Mohammed. He cited the Christian author, M. Renan's account of the prophet as the central figure of early Islamic history.<sup>29</sup> Renan suggested that the prophet's behavior was passive, indecisive, lacking in confidence and generally weak. Renan also asserted that the Prophet, in spreading his message, shied away from the zealotry of his followers. Webb agreed that the Prophet was not aggressive but disagreed with Renan's characterization of Mohammed as timid and weak-willed, arguing instead that

M. Renan very nearly approached the truth, but erred in his conclusion that Mohammed's reluctance to encourage any aggressive movement was due to weakness and irresolution. The Prophet was as thoroughly non-aggressive as the typical Shaker, and never consented to the use of arms unless it was necessary to protect the lives of his followers. His heart overflowed with the love of God and his fellow-man, and there was

28 Webb, *Ibid*, pp.49-50.

29 Webb, *Ibid*, p.54. Webb cited from M. Renan's *Life of Jesus*, titled, "Miscellaneous Essays."

no place in it for sentiments of ambition or revenge. It is clearly shown that he strenuously urged his followers to refrain from giving offense to their enemies and to abstain from violence whenever such a course was possible.<sup>30</sup>

Referring to the authority of the Muslim scholar, MoulaviCheragh Ali, who wrote *Reforms under Moslem Rule*, Webb argued that, during the life of the Prophet, Muslims fought exclusively out of self-defense.<sup>31</sup> Webb expressed the Moulavi's account of abuse and persecution suffered by Prophet Mohammed and early converts of Mecca. Webb sought to discredit the popular Christian notion that the Qur'an promotes violent proselytization by quoting unabridged passages from the holy text instead of those which Christian missionaries removed from their original context.

Webb explained in great detail the history of the early Muslims during the time of Mohammed, from the beginning of their persecution by the Qureish to the battle of Badr. He demonstrated that they did not resort to violence until they were threatened with annihilation by the Qureish. Outnumbered three to one, the Muslims at Badr were successful in defending Medina from an assault by the Qureish.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this victory, hostilities against Prophet Mohammed and his followers continued. Finally, after eight years of enduring continuous persecutions, Muslim soldiers led by Prophet Mohammed advanced upon Mecca to hold their persecutors accountable for their actions. Although Mecca offered no defense from the advancing Muslims, Webb wrote that,

Mohammed entered Mecca at the head of the Moslem army, and it is a notable fact that not a drop of blood was shed, and not a house was robbed nor a woman insulted, although it was in this city that the Prophet had been cruelly persecuted and driven forth a homeless, penniless fugitive. If he had any desire for revenge, then was the time for its full gratification; but the records show that his whole conduct was so gentle,

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30 Webb, *Ibid*, p.55.

31 Webb, *Ibid*, p.55. Webb quoted from MoulaviCheragh Ali's *Reforms under Moslem Rule*, titled, "Critical Exposition of the Popular Jihad."

32 Webb, *Ibid*, pp.60-61.

forgiving and full of fraternal love, that the Meccans joined his following by hundreds.<sup>33</sup>

The inhabitants of Mecca and Medina then accepted the teachings of the Prophet and regarded him as their ruler. Webb asserted that the accuracy of Islam's formative history, as he presented it, was supported by Christian and Muslim historians alike. He utilized citations from these scholars to emphasize the defensive stance of Muslims with regard to the battles in which they participated. He stressed their persecutors were the only aggressors.

Citing Edward Gibbon, author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, as supporting the Muslim's measures of self-defense, Webb linked Gibbon's materialist view on the matter of justice as similar to that of the philosophy of Islam.<sup>34</sup> To further demonstrate the passive nature of the Prophet and his followers, as well as their vindication in defending their city, Webb details their predicament –

The early Moslems in Mecca enjoyed neither liberty nor security; religious freedom was denied to them, although they were harmless and peaceful members of the community. Besides this they were expelled from their homes, leaving, in some instances, their families and property in the hands of their persecutors, while they were prevented from returning to Mecca, were refused access to sacred Mosque, and were pursued to Medina, where they were attacked by the Meccans. The persecution of the early Moslems, by the Koreish, was on religious grounds. They would not allow the believers to renounce the religion of their forefathers and profess Islam, and their intolerance was so bitter and unrelenting that they tortured some of the professors of the new faith, in order to force them to recant and return to idolatry.<sup>35</sup>

Webb also cited another Christian, Archbishop Secker who is with more tolerance and fairness than the average church-Christian usually displays in regards to religious persecution. The theologian argued that,

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33 Webb, *Ibid*, p.62.

34 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire*, New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

35 Webb, *Ibid*, p.63.



Taking away the lives, the fortune, the liberty and the rights of our brethren, merely for serving their Maker in such a manner as they are persuaded they ought, when, by doing so, they hurt not human society, nor any member of it materially, is evidently inconsistent with all justice and humanity, for it is punishing those who have not injured us, and who, if they mistake, deserve pity from us.<sup>36</sup>

Webb, having thoroughly portrayed the history of the persecution endured by Prophet Mohammed and his followers, argues that, although they had the opportunity to exact equally cruel revenge on their persecutors, they instead granted not only a general amnesty to their Meccan enemies but an open invitation to embrace their faith as well. Prior to their bloodless triumph over Mecca, Webb demonstrated, the Muslims fought only when all other means of self-preservation had been exhausted. His response was,

There is not a single instance in the history of Islam during the life of the Prophet, when the Moslems fought for revenge, to impose the faith by force of arms, or to plunder the caravans which passed the city, as has been charged by some prejudiced and untruthful writers. The permission to fight was given to the believers, only because they were fought against or were attacked first, and had been wronged and driven from their homes without just cause. This was in full accord with the laws of nations and of nature.<sup>37</sup>

In support of his argument, Webb concluded by citing two other prominent Christian thinkers, Thomas Carlyle and John Davenport, who were apologetic towards Islam.<sup>38</sup> Carlyle, in his book, *Hero as Prophet*, romantically credited Islam with delivering Arabia “from darkness into light” and praised its zealous spirit which enabled it to stretch from Spain to India within 100 years of its inception – “These Arabs, the man Mohammed, and that one century – is it not as if a spark had fallen, one spark, on a world of what seemed black, unnoticeable sand? But

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36 Webb, *Ibid*, p.63.

37 Webb, *Ibid*, p.64.

38 Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle: A Biography*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983.

lo! The sand proves explosive powder, blazes heaven-high, from Delhi to Granada!”<sup>39</sup> Webb cited Carlyle’s acknowledgment of the spread of Islam through the East, because it offers no mention of forced conversions.

John Davenport, not only strove to dispel the myth of violent Islamic propagation, but also criticized those Christians who perpetuated it. He conceded that,

It is a monstrous error to suppose, as some have done, and others still do, that the faith taught by the Koran was propagated by the sword alone, for it will be readily admitted by all unprejudiced minds, that Mohammed’s religion – by which prayers and alms were substituted for the blood of human victims, and which, instead of hostility and perpetual feuds, breathed a spirit of benevolence and of social virtues, and must, therefore, have had an important influence upon civilization.<sup>40</sup>

Davenport’s presentation of the historical roots of Islam underscored Webb’s frequent assertions of Muslim passivity. Citing the works of such Christian scholars, Webb demonstrates that the perception of Islam as a progressive religion could be propagated in the West.

Webb also confronted the issue of slavery and concubinage in Islam. He noted that the association of these two vices conflicted with the very principle and spirit of Islam. Again, Webb cited Sir William Muir, the Christian author who penned the book, *Life of Mahomet*, as the main person who propagated these misconceptions. He charged that Muir “could neither quote any verse of the Koran sanctioning the enslavement of the captives of war or servile concubinage, nor relate any instance of them during the several battles described therein.”<sup>41</sup> Webb argues that nowhere in the Qur’an was the subject of slavery and female concubinage discussed, and that slaves were referred to as “de factor but not de jure.”<sup>42</sup>

Webb cites Moulavi Cheragh Ali’s commentary on this issue. The Mo-

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39 Webb, *Ibid*, p.66.

40 Webb, *Ibid*, p.66.

41 Webb, *Ibid*, p.51.

42 Webb, *Ibid*, p.51.

ulavi argues that the Holy Book actually implements measures to eradicate the custom of slavery. The Qur'an sanctions the emancipation of slaves, professing such an act as pious and righteous. Legally, he argues, the manumission of slaves was a common expiation for transgressions as serious as murder. Slaves were given the right to buy their own freedom. Those who could not afford to do so could be freed by public funds. According to the Moulavi these were the gradual steps that reduced and eventually abolished slavery – “the future slavery was abolished by the Koran by putting the axe deep into its root and by annihilating its real source.”<sup>43</sup> To prevent future slavery, the Qur'an, according to the Moulavi, prohibited the exploitation of prisoners of war, stating that, “The captives of war were, according to the clear injunctions of the Koran, contained in the 5th verse of the 47th Sura, to be dismissed either by a free grant or by exacting a ransom. They were neither to be enslaved nor killed.”<sup>44</sup>

Webb also refuted the American misperception that Muslims were intemperate. He noted that it is unaccustomed for devout Muslims to consume intoxicants of any kind, a vice he termed as “unknown” among them. Webb observes that of the Muslims he encountered, only those who mimicked the mannerisms and dress of the West, drink alcoholic beverages. Muslims wearing the traditional Islamic clothing, he stressed, abide by the Qur'an's prohibition against such shameful activities. Webb concluded that the rare occurrences of intemperate Muslims were influenced by contact with the West; their inebriation could not have originated from Islamic culture.

Summing up Islamic doctrine, Webb states that complete submission to the will of God is key to Islam and that prayers are cornerstones of this religion. He argued that Islam “teaches universal fraternity, universal love, and universal benevolence, and requires purity of mind, purity of action, purity of speech and perfect physical cleanliness.” These requirements and practices are in stark contrast to the character flaws Western sources attributed to Muslims. He further states that Islam is free from priestly intervention and superfluous ceremony. Henceforth, he

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43 Webb, *Ibid*, p.51.

44 Webb, *Ibid*, p.52.

underscored the religion's emphasis on each individual's responsibility for his or her actions. Webb commented that a true follower embodies the tenants of his religion daily – he “lives in his religion and makes it the paramount of his existence,” thus, ready to present his soul before God when the hour of prayer arrives. A devout Muslim, Webb argued, immerses himself in the religion “in all his goings and comings” so that, at the crack of dawn, he awakes from the call of the Muezzin and again begins a new day with prayer. Such practice of the religion in all facets of life is in keeping with the philosophy of Islam.

### Conclusion

Webb's mission was not to proselytize but to educate his countrymen. His obscurity resulted primarily from the reluctance of his contemporaries and later historians and religious studies scholars to examine his work and its significance to American religious history. Although this unwillingness to consider Webb and his potential contribution to nineteenth century American religious history originated mostly from their Western biases, Webb himself was instrumental in averting public interest from his defense of Islam. By making frequent polemic assessments of Christianity before a mainly Christian audience, he effectively alienated himself from his countrymen. Webb's contention with Christianity was in fact a defense mechanism he employed to counter anti-Islamic hostility directed towards him.

Christian missionary tracts of the nineteenth-century, along with the reactions to Webb's presentations at the Parliament, demonstrated that American bigotry towards Islam was extensive. To this day resistance to Islam within the social, religious and academic communities of the United States still runs deep. Indeed, scholars continue to marginalize it as a twentieth century phenomenon despite the evidence that Islam and its adherents have existed within the scope of American culture and history since its formative years.<sup>45</sup>

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45 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Make Room for the Muslims?” in Walter H. Conser Jr. and Summer B. Twiss, eds., *Religious Diversity and American Religious History: Studies in Traditions and Cultures*, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997, p. 224. In her article, Haddad writes that the history of and activity of the Muslim community in the United States has been seen as marginal or insignificant by the academic community and has been mostly ignored by historians of Islam and American religion...

A joint review of American history and religious studies demonstrates that such propaganda existed in the form of tracts written by American Christian missionaries such as Samuel M. Zwemer of the Young People's Missionaries Movement of the United States. Prejudice against Islam indeed existed before the turn of the century. By doing so, it becomes apparent that the prejudice Webb sought so hard to correct became an influence in shaping today's incomplete history of Islam in America. These misperceptions were at the very heart of what Webb sought to discredit. Sources that perpetuated such stigmas about Islam, like misogyny, aggression, and ignorance, include religious texts, missionary, and articles from the popular literature of the turn of the nineteenth century. Among these are such missionary tracts as E. M. Wherry's *Islam; or, The Religion of the Turk*, published in 1896 and Samuel M. Zwemer's *The Moslem World*, published in 1908. Both works characterized Islam as a heathen and barbaric religion in sensational details. Since the nineteenth century was regarded as the heyday for missionary activity, it is not surprising then that public viewed these religious and missionary texts as authoritative works.

Webb challenged American Christians and others to read his book, *Islam in America*, and admonished them that Islam contained the moral and social character to which their own faiths had so aspired. Webb argued that, among its followers, the Islamic faith inspired impeccable adherence to divine mandate, whereas the Christian doctrines merely echoed scriptural rhetoric among its congregations. Islam, he argued, was not the base religion that Christian missionaries claimed it to be, but a social force capable of providing remedy to the social blights in America "prostitution, marital infidelity, drunkenness and kindred vices."<sup>46</sup> He refuted the notion that the Christian community possesses a moral and social substance superior, or even equal, to that of the Muslims.

Apart from Islam's practically, Webb stressed that it was also steeped in philosophical profoundness that was traditionally overlooked in the

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There is a growing feeling among American Muslims that the story of the discovery of America has not been fully told...

46 Webb, *Philosophic Islam: A Lecture*, Hyderabad, India: Central Jail Press, 1892, p.15.

West. He attributed this oversight to a religious bias towards Christianity. Webb noted that Theosophy, philosophy and various religions had left him with more questions than answers. Comparing these religions with the Islamic literature he obtained in the Philippines, Webb discovered the holistic essence of Islam, its doctrines and philosophy in that the religion is not just a system of beliefs, but a way of life that is ingrained in the daily practices of Muslims. Webb believed that by educating the American public about this essence would result in negating the stereotypes and perceptions of Islam.

Throughout his endeavors, Webb divided his effort between refuting the anti-Islamic claims issued by his countrymen like Zwemer, Wherry, and Irving, and seeking to persuade others to re-examine and rethink their views. He fervently campaigned to dispel, for example, the popular belief that Muslims sought to proselytize through violence. Such generalizations, he argued, were based on sensationalized reports on the isolated incidents of a few Muslims and their habits. He pointed out that there are “fanatical and bigoted” followers in every faith, and that evaluating a religious system based solely on the actions of such zealots is not fair.<sup>47</sup>

Islam has encountered more resistance and prejudice from the American religious community, scholars and the general public than most other religions. Webb is unique in that he was among the first to publicly identify this hostility during an era when the American consciousness was imbued with Eurocentrism and Orientalism. As an advocate for Islam, he insisted upon a fair presentation of his religion. His contributions have been overlooked and deserve further examination. Recognizing Webb and his role at the Parliament is essential to the incorporation of Islam and its adherents within the broader context of the study of religious movements in the United States.

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<sup>47</sup> Webb, “The Spirit of Islam”, p.464.

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