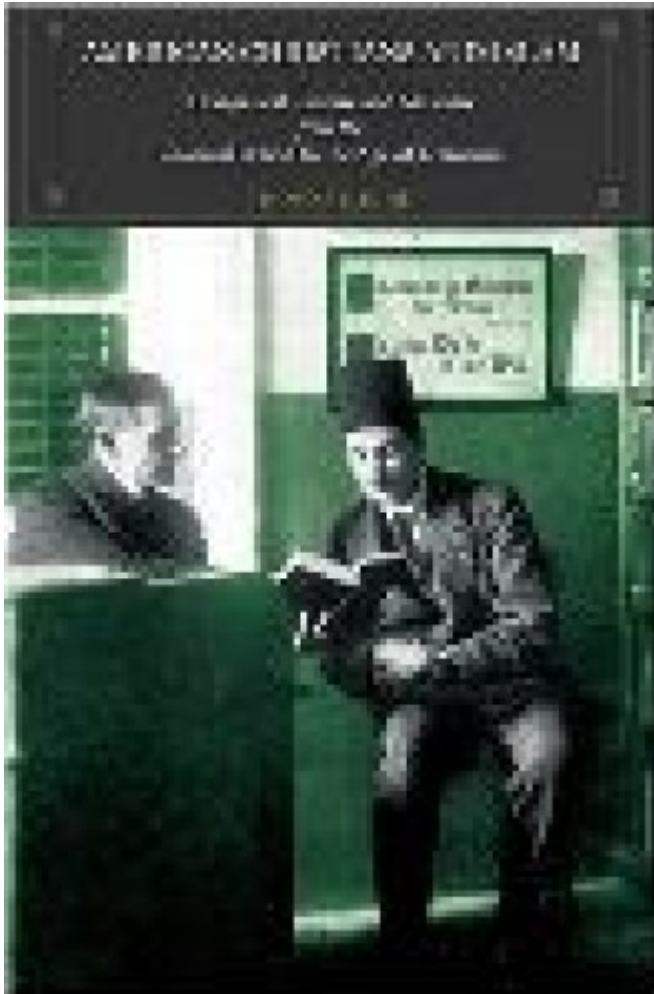


American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism

reviewed by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue

In Review



American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism

Thomas S. Kidd

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Before September 2001, many Americans may have believed that Islam and Christianity had gotten along peaceably since 1400 or so. In *American Christians and Islam*, Thomas Kidd demonstrates otherwise, taking us through the American centuries and showing us a consistent conversation among conservative Protestant Christians about Muslims—though not with them. Kidd explains that his book is not “about Islam itself. It is about American Christians and the views they produced about Islam.”

In the tradition of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) and R. Laurence Moore’s *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (1986), Kidd argues that what these Christians have had to say about the other—Muslims—has revealed much about the observers themselves. In eight chronologically ordered chapters, Kidd details conservative Protestants’ “desire to see Muslims convert to Christianity, the fascination with missionary work among Muslims, the mixing of political policy and theology as it relates to the Muslim world (and Israel), and the insertion of Islam into eschatological schemes.” He casts a careful eye over missionary memoirs, conversion narratives and popular eschatologies to demonstrate that American Christians have often imagined themselves as chosen and bound for heaven by imagining that Muslims are not.

Most colonial Protestants learned about Islam not from Muslim African slaves but from books, sermons and English and American accounts of enslavement by Muslim “Barbary” or “barbarian” pirates from North Africa. The marauding characters in these narratives engaged in sexual deviance and tyrannical mistreatment of prisoners, and they often forced conversions to Islam. These texts reinforced colonial observers’ view of Islam as a superstitious tangle of works-righteousness constructed around a fanatical impostor.

Protestants used images of Islam in religious disagreements within and outside the fold. Roger Williams invoked “Mahomet” the impostor to critique Quakerism in his 1676 book *G. Fox Digg’d out of His Burrowes*. George Whitefield exchanged anti-Islamic barbs with antirevivalist critics, who in turn compared the great itinerant’s

methods to those of the “enthusiast” Muhammad. Even Jonathan Edwards imagined Islam’s place in the Christian cosmos as one part of Satan’s doomed kingdom. He took news of Muslims converting to Christianity as a signal that Jesus’ return was imminent.

Polemical uses of Islam proliferated from the late 18th into the 19th century. In the Revolutionary and early national periods, imagined Islam took on the political freight of antirepublicanism. Traditionalists classed antebellum religious innovations as defective, along with Islam; the Mormon prophet became, for instance, “The Yankee Mahomet.” Concerns about resurgent Barbary piracy shaded into abolitionists’ rhetoric; slaveholders were as bad as barbarian Muslim captors.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) spearheaded early-19th-century attempts to evangelize Muslims (rather than simply imagining them) as a way to hasten the millennium. Legal strictures against proselytizing non-Christians in the Ottoman Empire, however, meant that Christian missionaries there usually worked only among Orthodox Christians. If they could be converted to Protestantism, they would witness powerfully to their Muslim neighbors.

ABCFM missionary Cyrus Hamlin, an experienced hand in Turkey, shifted away from this approach. In his memoir *Among the Turks*, published in the 1870s, he did not denigrate Islam as a religion. He promoted social service and Muslim “uplift.” Reformed Church leader Samuel Zwemer was another sophisticated missions strategist, “the most influential American Christian missionary to Muslims of his time.” He joined a postmillennial confidence in the imminent demise of Islam with a commitment to social service—a fusion of conservative theology and modernist methods that later controversies within U.S. Protestantism drove apart. Zwemer’s example led mission organizers to acknowledge past failures to deal respectfully with faithful Muslims as spiritual brothers and helped them to formulate a comprehensive strategy for reaching them with the gospel.

World War I pushed this moderation toward a somber millennialism. Some American Christians, including ABCFM missionaries, interpreted the war as a strictly political event. Others, however, worried that events such as the Armenian genocide in Turkey revealed a cosmic conflict brewing between Christianity and Islam. (One strength of Kidd’s book is its insistence on the diversity of Protestant evangelical opinion.) Prophecy-watchers thought the war presaged millennial transformation: the British capture of Jerusalem, the Balfour Declaration and the formation of the

League of Nations fit some interpretations of the book of Daniel. They also began to think more pointedly about how Christianity could take political advantage of Islam's apparent postwar vulnerability. As the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1910s and 1920s heated up, conservatives rededicated themselves to conversionary missions, giving no quarter to non-Christian religions. Groups such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Sudan Interior Mission acted on views of Islam as Christianity's great cosmic foe.

The postwar landscape that Kidd surveys in the second half of the book probably looks more familiar to his readers than any other in the book. The Holocaust and the creation of Israel fueled both a cataclysmic, dispensational view of Islam's destruction and a de-emphasis on missions. Islam's anticipated demise became a kind of prophecy placeholder, marking the way to Israel's triumphant expansion and the Jews' subsequent conversion to Christianity. Voices like Kenneth Cragg's in *The Call of the Minaret* (1956), clear about Muslims' need for the Christian gospel while wary of extreme Zionist energies, faded. Dispensationalist Christians overwhelmingly supported Israel as a matter of prophetic correctness. Cold-war concerns about Russia's designs on Israel bolstered conservative Christian support for American anticommunism as biblical prophecy became the playbook for geopolitical engagement.

Still, some evangelical conservatives tried to temper assumptions about the inevitability of conflict with an insistence on the political roots of the conflict between Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews. In 1969, for instance, Charles Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary cautioned that "a concern for people, more than for politics or even prophecy, brings the Palestine problem into proper perspective." As the furor over Jimmy Carter's 2006 book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, demonstrated, such voices may not be welcome in contemporary discussions of Israel and Palestine. But Kidd shows that they have sounded clearly in years not too far past, giving hope that they might return.

Through the revival of Christianity in Indonesia in the 1960s, the rise of OPEC and the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s, and the events of 2001, Americans' focus on the Middle East has intensified. Missions to Muslims—or at least conversations about them—have continued. Yet Islam has, over the past several decades, taken on new force as the image of Christianity's foil, explaining some Christian conservatives' support of the Bushes' wars in Kuwait and Iraq. New dispensational readings of biblical prophecy claim that the Antichrist will be a Muslim, explaining some

Christian conservatives' suspicion of Barack Obama's Islamic background.

Still, Kidd explains, other conservative Christians read prophecy differently—by containing political events in a political realm and holding to a spiritual promise of redemption for all through Christ, not through Jerusalem. In the words of one conservative observer, “Arabs, too, have a prophetic future.” This moderating yet consistently Christian voice seems always to be there. Indeed, Kidd makes an interesting though not thoroughly compelling case for seeing George W. Bush as a brake on hardline Christian prophecy-watchers who hoped, post-9/11, for the destruction of Islam at the hands of the U.S. military.

Many of the motifs of earlier conversations about Islam recur in early-21st-century imaginings: an insistence on Islam's demonic or violent nature, for example, and on its inevitable, ultimately unsuccessful challenge to Christianity. Our skittishness toward Islam has a long history, but we have been shadowboxing an imagined Islam. Kidd suggests that Americans may now be reaping the whirlwind, and his book offers an informative tonic that might move Christians in the U.S. beyond deeply embedded suspicions and into more hospitable encounters with Muslims at home and abroad.