American Missionary Encounters with Eastern Christians in 19th Century Ottoman Empire: Locating Discourses of Gender and Civilization in Girls’ Schools

Kelly Hannavi
Department of History, Rutgers University
Advisor: Tuna Artun, PhD

Research Question
How did 19th century American Protestant missionary work in schools established in Eastern Turkey affect the educational opportunities for Eastern Christian girls and women? How were these opportunities influenced by gender ideologies, and to what extent, if any, did education change the native communities’ gender dynamics?

Background
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM)
• Created in 1810 during the Second Great Awakening
• Goal to convert as many non-Protestants as possible through evangelization
• Key terms: voluntarism, revivalism, benevolence, evangelism

Near East Missions, “Heathens” and “Nominal” Christians
• First Protestant missionaries arrived in Ottoman Palestine in 1820; first stations were created in Beirut and Malta in 1830
• Decline of Ottoman power, lack of Western colonialism, importance of Holy Lands attracted missionaries
• Conversion of Jews and Muslims were important, but not as practical as the revival of “nominal” Eastern Christians

Women and Modernization
• Civilization was seen as mutually exclusive with Western modernization, legitimizing colonization of Periphery nations
• Women, as caretakers of children, had potential to bring Christian “enlightenment” and values to their households

Female Education At Home and Abroad:
• Mary Lyon and the “Mount Holyoke Model”
• Transition from married missionary primary schoolteacher to single missionary in secondary and college level teaching
• Curriculum based on Bible, with classes (arithmetic, reading, writing, chemistry, and philosophy) taught in native tongues
• Spiritual activities and domestic chores emphasized to make female students “good Christian wives and mothers”

Methodology
• ABCFM Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University
• Sources include: yearly station reports, high school reports and journals, personal correspondence and diaries, periodicals and pamphlets produced for US audience
• Hand-coding thematically: domesticity, civilization, gender, and family discourses

Anticipated Results
• Rise of educational institutions and female literacy
• Translating religious texts into vernacular fortifying churches
• Consciousness of distinct religious and ethnic identity
• Alienation of women within their communities
• Struggles of female converts to contribute to local economies and survive during political turmoil

Significance
• East-West encounters shed light on current issues in the region: sectarianism, gendered violence, religious extremism
• Links between imperialist and nationalist treatment of women
• Problematizing notion that Eastern women became liberated through Western education

Conclusion
• Missionary histories still remain one-sided in perspective and argument
• Local accounts and sources need to be utilized in conjunction with missionary sources to identify gaps and contradictions
• Particularly, gender ideologies and dynamics, from both the West and the indigenous cultures, require historical analysis

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