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A Historical Overview: Six Contextual Models

The Nineteenth-Century Imperial Model

The Protestant missionary approach to Islam began with Henry Martyn (1781–1812). Martyn went to India in 1806 as a chaplain in the British East India Company. During a stay in Persia the year before his untimely death, he wrote three polemical tracts in debate with a Persian Muslim who wrote in defense of Islam (translated in Lee 1824:80–160). These are the first Protestant writings addressed to Muslims.

The Period of Polemics (1811–1900)

George Sale and Henry Martyn

Prior to Martyn, the few Protestants to write against Islam were non-missionaries who wrote for Westerners, not Muslims. They wrote at a distance from Islam, without the firsthand knowledge of Islam the later writers had. Except for the works of George Sale (1697–1736), what they wrote about Islam was often inaccurate. Sale's translation of the Qur'an with "Preliminary Discourse," first published in 1734 (Sale 1850:xi), is still valued by scholars today (Watt 1970:174). It is noteworthy that this work, which went through many reprints around the

world, was widely used by the early Protestant polemicists. Sometime early in the twentieth century, the first four chapters of the “Preliminary Discourse” were translated into Arabic and published separately as a polemical work, with corrective explanations and appendices added by the translator (Sale 1925).¹

This early approach is characterized by an aggressive polemic, known as “the Mohammedan Controversy,” which used the Qur’an liberally to disprove Islam. Shaped largely by the colonial model of Western (especially British) imperialism, the polemicists’ attitude toward Islam was basically negative. Even though most of them would have agreed that “of all non-Christian religions it contains the largest amount of truth” (Rouse n.d.:v), they felt that it also has fatal “weaknesses.” As one of them put it:

The amount of truth which is included in the Religion of Islam has . . . commended it to the acceptance of vast multitudes of our fellow-creatures. The errors, superstitions and falsehoods with which these doctrines are mingled have deceived the followers of the “Arabian Prophet” to their ruin. The evil results which have followed are everywhere patent. (Tisdall 1895:53)

When one analyzes the polemicists’ evaluation of Islam, one is struck by the pervasiveness of belief in cultural and religious evolution. It is assumed that an evolutionary process is at work in the various cultures of the world. The differences that exist between societies, from the most primitive to the most advanced, are explained in evolutionary terms and are attributed to the differing degrees of truth each contains. In the evolutionary framework, Islam is classified as an inferior religion, somewhere between the primitive cultures of Africa and Asia and the advanced civilizations of the Christian West.

Sir William Muir and Gustav Weil

Like Martyn, Sir William Muir (1819–1905) was an administrator in the British East India Company. He wrote several important historical works on the life of Muhammad and on the Caliphate, as well as several polemical works addressed to Muslims, that give an evolutionary

1. It’s ironic that it was translated for this purpose, because in his day Sale was charged with putting Islam on a par with Christianity; his “Preliminary Discourse” defends Muhammad against charges made by Humphrey Prideaux about him being an impostor (1697).