

The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in the 19th century, the Gambia

The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) was established in October 1818, although the first Methodist missionary ventures date back to the mid-18th century. Managed and financed mainly by the indefatigable Thomas Coke (1747-1814), early Methodist missionary endeavours were rather serendipitous and frequently followed up on work started by individual Methodists who had settled abroad. By the early 19th century, this had resulted in two strands of mission work: the so-called foreign missions aimed at strengthening and expanding Methodist communities in the colonies and mainland Europe, and the missions 'among the heathens' and Muslims, which were focused on evangelisation and converting people to Christianity. With more than 40 missionaries around the globe by 1810 and the coordination and funding dependent on a single person (Thomas Coke), the need to establish an effective missionary structure was evident.

The formation of WMMS was most likely inspired by kindred organisations such as the Baptist Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society. However, in many ways the Methodist home organisation was different in that the Methodist Conference remained responsible for the selection, stationing and supervision of missionaries, while WMMS's task was to raise the necessary funds and arrange practicalities (Pritchard, *Methodists and their societies*, p. 25).

Methodist missionary work during the 19th century depended entirely on voluntary donations. To raise awareness, church circuits organised monthly missionary prayer meetings and women's and youth auxiliaries took on fundraising for mission. To promote the missionary endeavour, WMMS supervised the publication of the periodical *Missionary Notices*, later continued as *Wesleyan Missionary Notices* (1816-1904). Missionaries also played their part in lobbying for mission work and writing quarterly letters and reports to keep contributors abreast of developments on the mission field. When on furlough, missionaries travelled around the country on speaking tours and a substantial number also published their diaries or travelogues. The fact that these texts were produced for the purposes of fundraising profoundly shaped both their style and content.

For most of the 19th century, missionary training was scant and informal. Candidates aspiring to missionary service usually participated in the

regular two-year ministerial training course, while language, intercultural skills and familiarity with the context were to be acquired on the job, provided missionaries survived long enough to master them. West Africa in particular had a reputation as 'a white (wo)man's grave' – it seems that candidate missionaries frequently indicated their willingness to be sent anywhere, apart from West Africa (Pritchard, *Methodists and their societies*, p. 25).

Missionaries sent to areas with a substantial Muslim population received no special training, nor were they required to have specific qualifications for interaction with Muslims. The linguist Robert Maxwell MacBrair (1775-1866), who briefly served in Egypt before he was sent to the Gambia in 1835 to work as a Bible translator, seems to have been an exception. MacBrair read and spoke Arabic and was well versed in the Qur'an and key themes in Christian Muslim polemics. However, his insistence that all missionaries working among Muslims should learn Arabic as well as a vernacular spoken by Muslims went unheeded (Findlay and Holdsworth, *History of WMMS*, vol. 4, p. 120).

The awareness that mission in a predominantly Muslim context might require distinct missionary strategies only gradually became apparent. Most missionaries were convinced that truth could only be found in (certain forms of) Christianity; all other forms of religiosity were considered 'superstition', 'false religion' or 'paganism'. Though certain that no other religious traditions had any salvific potential, theologically trained missionaries seem to have valued some traditions above others in line with prevalent ideas of their time. In the hierarchy of religions, Islam was considered 'higher' than what was called 'paganism' but 'lower' than Judaism and Christianity (Pritchard, *Methodists and their societies*, pp. 20-1). Nonetheless, the prevailing sentiment regarding Islam (usually called Mohammedanism) and Muslims was one of disapproval and denunciation. Islam was considered a 'false religion' and Muḥammad 'a false prophet' and 'an imposter'.

Not only theology, but also racism shaped Methodist perceptions of Muslims (and non-Muslims) in West Africa. William Fox (d. 1845), who worked in Bathurst (1834-43), compiled *A brief history of the Wesleyan missions on the western coast of Africa* and wrote:

Whether Mahometan or Pagan, Africans are all ignorant, guilty and depraved, 'earthly, sensual and devilish', 'sitting in darkness and in the region of the shadow of death', 'having no hope, and without God in the world'. The

moral degradation of both Mohammedans and Pagans in Western Africa is shown in many striking features. (Fox, *Brief history*, p. 26)

Despite the all-prevailing deprecation of Islam, the faith was considered a considerable missionary threat and rival. Particularly in the Gambia and Nigeria, where jihads had become an effective means of spreading Islam in the 19th century, missionaries keenly felt the competition. In 1912, George Findlay and Mary Findlay recorded in their history of WMMS:

Every advance made among the negro peoples of Western Africa brings the Church in closer conflict with Islam, the Antichrist of this continent, by whose aggression the ancient flourishing Christianity of Northern Africa was destroyed. [...] Islam has much to offer to the untutored pagan. Admittedly, it effects a partial elevation of the fetish-worshipping negro; there its redeeming influence stops. Muhammadanism is 'a religion without the Divine Fatherhood, without compassion for those outside its pale; and to the womanhood of Africa it is a religion of despair and doom.' Muhammad is no 'schoolmaster to lead to Christ'; but a rival who bars His way. Paganism cannot live in the new light; but where Islam steps in first by ever so little, Christianity is shut out for generations. [...] For the honour of Christ, for the love of souls, for the sanctity of womanhood, for the peace and safety of Europe, the march of Muhammad must be challenged. A new and holier Crusade is called for.... (Findlay and Findlay, *Wesley's world parish*, p. 202).

Despite these experiences, theological reflection and policy documents on Islam and mission to Muslims in the 19th century were rare. Although one of the society's first secretaries, Richard Watson, was particularly interested in missions to the Islamic world, most of the actual missionary work was conducted in Roman Catholic contexts in Europe, in the colonies, China, southern India and the Pacific. In the 1830s, there was a brief experiment in Egypt; however, the work seems to have consisted mainly of distributing Arabic tracts and Bibles among Copts, and the initiative was terminated after a few years. Also, in Sri Lanka and India, Methodist missionaries occasionally encountered Muslims, but it was in 19th-century West Africa that WMMS missionaries had their most extensive encounters with Islam and Muslims. Even there, interactions were limited: colonial policy constrained missionary work among Muslims in northern Ghana and Northern Nigeria, and mission work in Sierra Leone was confined to Freetown for most of the 19th century. Likewise, Methodist missionary work in Nigeria only ventured beyond the Abeokuta region in the late 19th century. Chronic lack of funds and personnel, the safety hazards

caused by the Soninke-Marabout wars and the focus on work among liberated Africans notwithstanding, only in the Gambia did joint teams of indigenous and expatriate missionaries regularly interact with Muslims throughout the 19th century.

It was *in situ* that policy and theological reflection emerged, and then only sporadically; official policy documents were few and far between. Two examples of such more systematic theological reflections are discussed below: the work of the linguist Robert MacBrair and a reflection by William Maude (1846-1931), a veteran missionary to West Africa who served in the Gambia for two periods, 1883-5 and 1897-1910. In most cases, however, missionary reflection on Islam and mission to Muslims is to be reconstructed from the scattered, brief remarks in letters or reports mainly devoted to other topics. Given the immense amount of written material produced by Methodist missionaries in the 19th century, this is no easy task. While some local mission histories (especially for the 20th century) dedicate a paragraph or chapter to Christian-Muslim encounters and theological reflection on Islam, no attempt has so far been made systematically to map and compare attitudes to Muslims from various contexts in 19th- and 20th-century WMMS materials.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

The archives of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1791-1948) are kept at the School of Oriental and African Studies and organised in 'boxes'. References to the archives therefore includes the box number in which the material can be found. The archives were put on microfiche by IDC Publishers, Leiden, and the collection is now owned by Brill Publishers. In addition to the box number, each note to archival material therefore also includes the series and microfiche number of the reference (abbreviated as mf.).

SOAS collection: <http://archives.soas.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MMS&pos>

Elizabeth Bennett's guide to the MMS collection at SOAS: http://archives.soas.ac.uk/CalmView/GetDocument.ashx?db=Catalog&fname=modified_bennett_guide.pdf

W. Fox, *A brief history of the Wesleyan missions to the Western coast of Africa*, London, 1851

Secondary

J. Pritchard, *Methodists and their missionary societies 1760-1900*, Farnham, 2013

- G.G. Findlay and W.W. Holdsworth, *The history of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, 5 vols, London, 1921-4
- G.G. Findlay and M.G. Findlay, *Wesley's world parish*, London, 1912
- W.T.A. Barber, 'The work of British societies', in W.J. Townsend, H.B. Workman and G. Eayrs (eds), *A new history of Methodism*, London, 1909, vol. 2, 283-361
- J. Telford, *A short history of the Wesleyan Methodist foreign missions*, London, 1905
- J. Telford, *The makers of our mission*, London, 1895
- W. Moister, *The rise, progress and present state of Wesleyan missions in various parts of the world*, London, 1868

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

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DATE 19th century

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE English

DESCRIPTION

When John Morgan (d. 1872), the first missionary to work in the Gambia estuary, arrived in Bathurst in 1821, Islam had not yet become the religion of the majority of the people. However, Muslims such as the Jakhanke and the Torodbe had settled in the area from the 11th century onwards, founding Muslim homesteads adjacent to established villages. In addition to trade and agriculture, they made a living by performing services for the community in the form of writing and teaching, and the production of amulets and traditional medicine. Gradually, over the centuries, more and more people embraced Islam and, as the number of Muslims increased, so did their influence (Sanneh, *The Jakhanke*, pp. 215-38). The mid-19th century saw a wave of Muslim emancipation and revivalist movements in the area, which erupted in a series of jihads against traditional leadership. On the banks of the Gambia, these jihads became known as the Soninke-Marabout wars (1849-1919). During these hostilities, which destabilised the area for the larger part of the 19th century, traditional leadership was overthrown, villages were pillaged and destroyed, and small transient Muslim states were established (Frederiks, *We have toiled all night*, pp. 128-50; Klein, *Islam and imperialism*; Quinn, *Mandingo kingdoms*). It was during these 19th-century jihads that the majority of the people living along the River Gambia became Muslims, though the popularisation of Islam continued well into the 20th century.

Nineteenth-century Methodist missionary activity therefore coincided with a time of profound religious change. The missionary materials mirror this turmoil and ponder its consequences for Christian mission. Initially, Methodist missionaries to the area were convinced that the conversion of the Gambian peoples to Christianity would be merely a matter of time, echoing the prevalent contemporary European view that African attachment to Islam was superficial. Many people seemed to show an interest in Methodist preaching; John Morgan describes these audiences as leisurely, reclining on their mats under a mango tree, listening to his sermons as long as he would want them to (Morgan, *Reminiscences*, pp. 6-7). However, his hope that these were indications that all would soon convert to Christianity proved unfounded, and he had to conclude that, whilst adherents of the African traditional religions were quite open to Christianity, Muslims were not. It made him exclaim that 'Mohammedans seemed to be shielded against Christianity as perfectly as the crocodiles in the river were against the spear and the bullet' (Morgan, *Reminiscences*, p. 46).

This opinion was reiterated again and again in the history of Christianity in the Gambia. Missionaries observed with growing concern that, while Christianity made little headway and mainly found support among the Liberated African community and some of the Wolof enslaved originating from Saint-Louis and the Petite Côte, Islam seemed to win the vast majority of the people. This appeared to confirm the classical Muslim retort to Christian preaching that 'Jesus Christ is white man's God and Mahomet black man's God' (Pullen to WMMS, St Mary's, 12 March 1882, Box 296/H2709 mf. 920). Also, polygamy, 'this woman question', proved to be an obstacle for conversion to Christianity. Many missionaries realised that Islam offered a worldview that could compete with Christianity, which meant that Muslims were not as open to the gospel as traditionalists and, furthermore, that Islam was a formidable missionary competitor. James Fieldhouse stated in 1876: 'I add that a Moslem is much more difficult to deal with than a Pagan, that a mind frequently preoccupied with specious errors will not so soon embrace the truth as a mind unfettered by false teachings' (Fieldhouse to WMMS, 20 October 1876, Box 295/H2709 mf 904).

The scarcity of converts caused many 19th-century Methodist missionaries to believe that Muslims were 'indoctrinated' against Christianity from childhood onwards (e.g. Peet to WMMS, 21 April 1859, Box 286/H2709 mf. 933). If Muslims were to be 'gained for Christ' at all, it would have to be at a young age. By exposing children at a tender age to both

Western culture and Christian teaching, missionaries attempted to counter the influence of Islam and the African traditional religions. Education therefore became the mainspring of Methodist missionary work in the 19th century. Benjamin Tregaskis (1814-85; chair 1865-74), one of West Africa's more notorious Methodist chairmen, is known to have exclaimed: 'You may sooner think of closing your chapels than of extending religion without education' (Prickett, *Island base*, p. 100). However, despite the truly impressive Methodist dedication to education in the Gambia, the results in terms of converts were extremely meagre. Where in other areas in West Africa schooling proved to be a powerful medium for spreading Christianity, in the Gambia education had no such result whatsoever.

Conversions of Muslims were few and far between, but the tales of those who did convert were recorded in detail and served as evidence that it was possible to break through the barrier of Islam (e.g. Cooper to WMMS, St Mary's, 20 April 1859, Box 286/H2709 mf. 933). Therefore, despite all evidence to the contrary, Methodists continued to hope for a turn of events, if only they tried hard enough. James Peet wrote in 1860: 'The day will come (that is certain) when thousands of Mohammedans who live near this place will be brought to Christ and instead of mosques of the false prophet being seen, the temples of Jehovah shall rise in Holy Grandeur to be a blessing to Africa' (Peet to WMMS, St Mary's, 25 January 1860, Box 286/H2709 mf 938). But neither he nor his colleagues lived to see that day.

By the 1880s, the Roman Catholic Spiritan missionaries had given up their attempts to convert Muslims and focussed on the evangelisation of adherents of the various African traditional religions. They hoped that the conversion of traditionalists would stop 'the tide of Islam' (Frederiks, *We have toiled all night*, pp. 231-2). The Methodists continued their attempts at Muslim evangelism for another 40 years. Because the traditional methods of preaching and education did not bring the desired result, different methods were contemplated. There were proposals for a medical mission, for better training of existing personnel, for engaging specifically trained personnel, for enforcing strict discipline amongst the membership so that they could be a better witnessing community, and so forth. But none of these initiatives produced significant results (Letter to Mission Committee. Synod 1917, Box 235/H2708 mf. 426; Synod Minutes 1922, Box 236/H2708 mf. 428).

The Soninke-Marabout wars, which started in 1849 and continued throughout the 19th century, not only hampered effective evangelism in the rural areas, but also profoundly shaped Methodist perceptions of Islam. John Bridgart (d. 1859) and George Meadows (c. 1825-97), who

served in the Gambia colony during the clashes with jihadist Fode Kabba in the 1850s, saw some of the Methodist chapels burnt and regarded Islam as very aggressive. Meadows wrote: 'Mohammedanism in a more bigoted and cruel form than it has hitherto shown, appears to be fast gaining the ascendancy in this part of Africa so far as I can learn' (Meadows to WMMS, St Mary's, 7 August 1855, Box 295/H2709 mf. 891). And later that month, Bridgart observed: 'It is well for the native Christians that we are under the protection of the British government. If it were not so I doubt (humanly speaking) whether Christianity would long be permitted to exist here' (Bridgart to WMMS, St. Mary's, 22 August 1855, Box 295/H2709 mf. 89). William Titcombe Pullen (1854-1930), who in 1882 had the Arabic tracts that he was distributing thrown back at him, also considered Islam to be an antagonistic religion (Pullen to WMMS, Bathurst, 12 March 1882, Box 296/H2709 mf. 920).

After the wars had subsided, Methodist perceptions about Islam melted. The veteran missionary William Maude, who worked in West Africa between 1867 and 1920 and served in the Gambia at the turn of the century when the Soninke-Marabout wars had ended, considered Islam to be superficial and little more than paganism: 'The Mohammedanism of the Gambia is of a very low type and may better be described as paganism, witchcraft and greengreemism' (Maude to WMMS, St Mary's, 31 January 1899, Box 288/H2709 mf. 1001).

For most of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Methodist missionaries underestimated the depth of commitment to Islam. They considered Islam to be a religion that had not truly touched people's lives. As late as 1929 the Africa Secretary Thompson wrote:

The Muhammedanism of West Africa is not at present of a fanatical type. The chief reason is that it is so superficial and barbarous. The Muhammedanism which I have seen in our West African Colonies is paganism with the thinnest possible veneer of Islam on the surface. The feelings, convictions and practices of many West African Moslems have not been deeply affected by the change of religion. (Thompson to Eburne, London, 31 December 1929, Box 763/H2709 mf. 1084)

Superficial, barbarian, ignorant and false were words frequently used in connection to Islam. Methodists were convinced that neither Islam nor African traditional religions would endure in the encounter with modernity. Once exposed to sound – Christian – education, Islam's 'weaknesses' would become evident and Muslims would convert to Christianity 'en masse'. The 1924 Synod – wishfully – wrote that, though Islam had claimed

some of the indigenous ethnic groups, 'Muhammadanism itself is breaking up under the influence of modern education and modes of thought and life. Because it is a religion of the letter and not of the spirit, it does not progress and it cannot satisfy the needs of our age' (Synod Minutes 4 (1924), Box 238/H2708 mf. 428). This echoed a widely carried prediction that adherence to Islam would crumble once its adherents had been exposed to modern civilisation and Western education. It is unnecessary to add that these predictions never materialised.

Only in the late 1920s, nearly 40 years after their Roman Catholic colleagues, did Methodist missionaries begin to conclude that Muslims were not willing to convert to Christianity. From then on, the focus of the Methodist mission shifted to adherents of African traditional religions who had recently migrated to the Gambia. Once again, however, this led to a confrontation with Muslims as both groups engaged in fierce competition to win the newcomers for their religion. Thus, Methodists and Muslims laboured side by side in the Gambian 'race for the African soul'.

Though many among the indigenous agents and the Methodist community at large must have had daily interactions and conceivably also social or familial ties with Muslims, this is not reflected in the written materials; there are only intimations in the letters and reports that hint at this. In part, the reason is the underrepresentation of indigenous voices in the 19th-century material, and in part the concern of its authors. Close reading, however, reveals a few pointers. Robert MacBrair, for example, indicated that it was the Wolof evangelist John Cupidon who brought him into contact with a number of Muslim leaders (MacBrair, *Sketches*, p. 252). And a letter from the indigenous minister York Clement to WMMS from the mid-1860s evidences his connections with Muslims in the Georgetown area (among whom was the King of Kattaba) and describes his diaconal ministry among refugees (Muslims as well as non-Muslims) from the Soninke-Marabout wars (Clement to WMMS, Georgetown, 14 August 1867, Box 287 H2709 mf. 781). Also, there must have been regular interactions with Muslims in the schools (pupils as well as parents), but this is only mentioned in passing. The dominant representation of Muslims in 19th-century Methodist documents from the Gambia is that of Muslims as objects of conversion, or 'aggressive' competitors for the souls of Africans. The texts rarely reference social interactions with Muslims or portray them as neighbours, shopkeepers, artisans, etc.

Despite the fact that the Gambia became a predominantly Muslim society from the mid-19th century onwards, the Methodists did very little theological reflection in relation to Islam, though there are two exceptions:

Negroes are capital talkers. Here comes the chief and a few others!



MANDINGO.

The Mandingoes are tall, slender, and often handsome. Their hair is woolly and their skin quite dark; but they have not the flat nose and thick lips of the Negro proper. They are nimble, active in war, and enterprising in commerce.

Illustration 9. A Mandingo, accompanied by MacBrair's description

Robert Maxwell MacBrair produced a policy paper entitled *On the best method of disseminating the scripture in north-western Africa* (c. 1836-9), and William Maude wrote *Memorandum on Mohammedanism and Christianity in West Africa* (c. 1910). Both men were experienced missionaries who had worked among Muslims in more than one context.

MacBrair had briefly worked in Egypt before he was sent to West Africa in 1835, where he served a two-year term. A gifted linguist, he was charged with making Mandinka and Fula translations of the Bible while in the Gambia. To facilitate contact with informants, he was stationed upriver in an area with a strong Muslim presence. During his term of service, MacBrair, who was fluent in Arabic, had numerous interactions with Muslim scholars who were deeply impressed by his linguistic abilities and knowledge of the Qur'an, though less impressionable when it came to MacBrair's not too subtle attempts at evangelisation. His letters and

travelogues document recurring discussions with Muslims on familiar polemical themes such as the crucifixion, Jesus as the Son of God and the beauty and inimitability of the Qur'an.

MacBair had a low opinion of West African Islam. He writes: "The religious creed of the Mandingoes and their neighbours consists, almost entirely, of a number of heathenish superstitions and "country fashions", which would be an abomination to rigid Musselmen, and which some of their *fodays* look down upon with contempt, as being only "fit for children" (MacBair, *Sketches*, p. 315). Some of his favourite methods of evangelisation seem to have included public debates with marabouts, exposing them as charlatans, debunking their claim to Arabic literacy and ridiculing them by publicly challenging them to prove the protective powers of their charms. Muslim scholars who were well-versed in Arabic and the Qur'an received more respect. One of them, a Fula *foday* from Futa Jallon, aided MacBair with his grammars of Mandinka and Fula; the manner in which MacBair describes his interactions with 'Gabriel' gives the impression that the two men struck up some sort of a collegial friendship (MacBair, *Sketches*, pp. 294-7).

MacBair was struck by the prevalence of books among Muslim scholars; his travelogue narrates time and again that Muslim scholars carried their books with them whenever they travelled. He also observed that quite a few of them possessed copies of the Bible or the New Testament in Arabic; several others visited him to solicit free copies. It was with respect to this high regard for texts written in Arabic that MacBair saw an opening for the evangelisation of Muslims, especially since 'I cannot learn that they have imbibed the eastern dogma of the adulteration of the sacred text', most likely meaning by this *tahrif* (MacBair, *Sketches*, p. 316). This was perhaps one of the reasons for his policy document to WMMS entitled *On the best method of disseminating the scripture in north-western Africa* (MacBair, *Sketches*, Appendix II, pp. 314-27). Some parts of the document are worth quoting:

Again: the holy scriptures in Arabic are eagerly received by the native priests and religious people, though few can read or understand them. And here it must be remarked, that more importance has been attached to the Arabic, with respect to Western Africa, than is warranted by actual fact. Were the Arabic language really understood, by even the *maraboos*, amongst the people, nothing more than the circulation of the Bible amongst them might be deemed suitable for the overthrow of Mahometanism; for I cannot learn that they have imbibed the eastern dogma of the adulteration of the sacred text. But this is not the case; yet as the Mahometans of Western Africa are much attached to the Arabic characters, missionaries acquainted with this

language might thus advantageously teach and explain to these people the holy scriptures, which are 'able to make wise unto salvation'. (MacBair, *Sketches*, Appendix II, pp. 315-16)

And also:

Many of the Negro Mahometans have no doubt embraced this false system [Islam] for want of a better, whilst others have been converted by the sword; and the hold which the precepts of the Koran have upon such is not very strong, being mixed up with their country superstitions. But though most of these would no doubt be willing to learn the Bible, it is to be feared that they would draw back from the Roman characters with superstitious dread believing them to contain some white man's *greegrees*. For though they reverence the 'law and the gospel', and acknowledge Jesus the Son of Mary (not of God) to be the only Messiah, and also believe that Christianity shall finally pervade all the world, yet they are scrupulously attached to the customs of their fathers, and would regard the leaving of them as being a greater crime than that of apostasy. [...] The matter, therefore, stands thus: To circulate the Arabic scriptures to much advantage amongst the Mandingoes, would require missionaries conversant both with Arabic and Mandingo, to teach and explain the Bible to the people. On the other hand, a missionary acquainted with the Mandingo might teach the people out of the scriptures translated into this language, and written in Roman characters; but he might not easily prevail upon the Mahometans to learn in this form. Another course still remains, which is, to translate the scriptures into Mandingo, but to write it in Arabic instead of Roman characters. The Mandingoes might wish to receive the Bible in this shape; and as they usually learn to repeat whatever they read, portions of the scripture might eventually be more widely diffused than the precepts of the Koran, because they would be better understood. It is also a custom with some of the people to write down in Arabic characters anything that they wish to remember in Mandingo; and they have their own form for this purpose. (MacBair, *Sketches*, Appendix II, pp. 319-20)

Therefore, MacBair recommended the distribution of the Bible in Arabic and *ajami* (vernacular translations in Mandinka and Fula written in Arabic script):

You will agree with me in recommending, that in all missions to the Mahometans, the most expedient plan is at once to instruct them in the word of God; and, for this purpose, to collect a few of them together, and teach them to read the scriptures, explaining their meaning, and exhorting them to obey the heavenly voice. 'It is the law', 'it is the gospel', 'it is the word of God' comes with powerful influence to the minds of the superstitious, as well as to the wise. On these principles, I should also recommend, that as

the demand for Arabic Bibles still continues, their distribution be pursued in a judicious manner; and that they be forwarded, if possible, into the interior, where the demand for them is considerably greater than on the coast. (MacBrair, *Sketches*, Appendix II, p. 322)

Again:

... in case of Christian missions being engaged in to any considerable extent amongst Mahometans, I might recommend that such extracts and passages of the New Testament as are most easy of comprehension, and which embrace the most important incidents in the history of our blessed Saviour, and the most prominent doctrines of the gospel (thus forming an antidote to Mahometanism and a guide to the path of truth), be published in Arabic-Mandingo. It would be expedient that such extracts be arranged in short paragraphs or chapters, so as to form convenient lessons for reading and committing to memory, and that they be printed in a clear type (like the last edition of the Arabic Testament by the British and Foreign Bible Society,) and on a small duodecimo page for the convenience of portability: because the natives are accustomed to carry their Breviaries in small leathern pouches suspended from their necks by thongs of the same material. [...] I do not propose that the Arabic-Mandingo should now be published, yet a few small pages (say the third chapter of John and the first of Hebrews) might be lithographed by way of experiment, to see if the Mahometans will wish to learn the Bible in this form, as many of them have assured me they would. (MacBrair, *Sketches*, Appendix II, pp. 326-7)

In his policy document, MacBrair therefore proposes the production and distribution of *ajami* Bible texts as a key instrument in evangelising Muslims. His evangelisation strategy seems to have hinged on three features: an *ajami* text would build on Muslim acquaintance with and respect for books as well as for the Arabic script and thus evoke a more 'familiar' feel than a sacred text in Roman letters; an *ajami* text, though written in Arabic script, was essentially a text in the vernacular and would therefore be comprehensible for a large audience, quite unlike the Arabic text of the Qur'an – this combination of Arabic script and vernacular message would make an *ajami* text a suitable instrument to explain the gospel and persuade people to embrace Christianity; by producing small, portable passages of an *ajami* Bible that could easily be distributed, carried and memorised, MacBrair proposes to copy methods of dissemination and memorisation of scripture that were already practised in the Muslim community in the Gambia. Though innovative and creative, there are no indications that MacBrair's proposals for *ajami* texts or for personnel well-versed in Arabic and Islam were taken up by WMMS.

Another person who reflected on the relationship of Christian mission to Muslims in West Africa was William Maude, a Methodist missionary with considerable experience in West Africa, serving in various capacities between 1867 and 1920. Commencing his missionary career in Sierra Leone, he later worked in the Gambia and Ghana. Towards the end of an extensive missionary career, he composed a reflection on Christian mission to Muslims and the various approaches to mission adopted by Muslims and Christians entitled *Memorandum on Mohammedanism and Christianity in West Africa* (c. 1910). In it he writes:

No organised effort has even been made to get at the Mohammedanism of West Africa. Christian workers have been divided between those who seem to think (and sometimes openly declare) that the Mohammedan cannot be won for Christ, those who believe he can, but don't know how, and those, perhaps the greater number, who have thought nothing about it. For myself I can come to no other conclusion than that, despite all our resolutions and regrets, unless something very remarkable takes place, something there is no sign of, West Africa, outside the present spheres of Christian influence, will be Mohammedan, after a fashion and that before very long. [...] It is not in this way [i.e. by force] Mohammedanism is spreading in West Africa today, but by the more peaceful methods of the missionary teacher and settler. The Mohammedan teacher is everywhere. He needs no society behind him, no funds to sustain him. He goes forth, as the first Christians went, with his staff and his wallet, and wherever he goes, he is at home. He is everywhere welcomed – though not perhaps more freely than the Christian teacher would be. Both have the prestige of being Book Men and God Men, and as such have a ready acceptance, wherever they go. [...] The Christian teacher goes as a stranger, amongst foreigners, and must be supported from without. It is just here that the Mohammedan scores. From the very first he has no difficulty in making a living. [...] It seems to me as if the first thing to be done, if we are to win these Mohammedan people to Christ, whom we love and whom we would serve, is *to make ourselves neighbourly*. We must show that, differences notwithstanding, we are their friends. We must gain their confidence, ministering to their bodily needs, familiarising them with Christian ideas, getting the children, humbling ourselves, after the manner of our Master, and making ourselves of them as far as we innocently and healthily can. (Maude on Mohammedanism, Box 295/H2709 mf. 1031)

Two things are worth noting in this pamphlet. First, Maude shows an awareness that mission to Muslims calls for a different approach from evangelism amongst adherents of African traditional religions. His report demonstrates that, possibly for the first time in Methodist history in the Gambia, Methodist missionaries were beginning to reflect on whether

and, if so, how the missionary target group affected the method of witness. Hence, Maude calls for a thorough reflection on what it means to witness to Muslims. His own view on 'being neighbourly' sounds uncommonly modern. In his opinion, witness to Muslims takes place in day-to-day relationships in which trust, service and friendship play a central role. Also, Maude stresses in other writings that spoken forms of witness are only one aspect of mission. In 1906, he had already pointed to the importance of witness in life and deeds (Maude to WMMS, Freetown, 24 January 1906, Box 795/H2709 mf. 1023). Thus, Maude can be seen as the forerunner of a new Methodist approach, an approach that focuses on Muslims rather than on Islam and that promotes a missionary attitude rather than a missionary strategy, an attitude in which the concepts of presence and service played a key role. Second, in his *Memorandum* Maude points to the different ways in which Methodists and Muslims propagate their religion; his phrasings seem to echo the work on African Islam by Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912). Maude describes how the Muslim Qur'an teacher contextualises his habits and services whereas the Christian catechist and missionary ultimately remains a stranger and outsider.

SIGNIFICANCE

For most of the 19th century Methodists in the Gambia had extensive interactions with Muslims. Initially convinced of the superiority of the Christian tradition, Methodist missionaries (expats as well as indigenous) gradually became aware that Islam was more deep-rooted in the region than they had originally assumed. Neither preaching nor educational efforts proved effective in persuading Muslims to convert. Rather, Islam offered a worldview that could compete with Christianity. By pointing to issues such as polygamy, Muslim scholars seemed to be able to make a convincing case that 'Jesus Christ is white man's God and Mahomet black man's God', thus demonstrating that, by the late 19th century, the argument that Islam was an 'indigenous African' religion, whereas Christianity was essentially a 'foreign' religion, was already common in West Africa.

The resistance by Muslims to conversion attempts, Muslim competition for converts among adherents of African traditional religions, and the Soninke-Marabout wars, fed into already preconceived negative theological assessments of Islam and resulted in antagonistic and hostile representations of Muslims in Methodist missionary materials during most of the 19th century: Islam was considered a 'false' and 'aggressive' religion and Muhammad a 'false prophet'. The close contacts with Muslims in day-to-day life do not seem to have engendered any in-depth theological

reflection; perhaps the short terms of service of most missionaries (largely caused by health challenges) and their relatively modest theological training played a part in this. Notable exceptions are the policy papers written by MacBrair and Maude, both men with extensive missionary experience. Though written at different times and with a different focus, both papers reflect on Christian witness among Muslims from the perspective of lived experiences and give concrete suggestions for Christian witness in a predominantly Muslim context; neither document, however, seems to have made much impact.

Despite the numerous set-backs and disappointments, the Methodist mission never entirely abandoned its hope of converting Muslims; the commitment to evangelisation persisted, including the evangelisation of Muslims. But during its history of nearly two centuries in the Gambia, the Methodist church gradually accepted that evangelisation could take manifold forms and that a meaningful Christian witness should not merely be assessed in terms of numbers of converts.

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