

2

Syrian Protestant College
Within Its Historical Context

For those born and educated in the Western world, such as myself, it is incredibly difficult to identify colonial epistemologies as such, because these ways of seeing the world are so deeply intertwined with our identity and our geopolitical location. It is often difficult to understand and respond effectively when our approaches to literacy education are challenged by scholars whose personal histories are marked by colonization and subordination, because we do not see how our own visions of literacy education have been colonized. Part of this conflict occurs because we do not have a full or nuanced understanding of history. Therefore, looking at the historical context surrounding literacy education during the colonial era, particularly in a geographical context that is often referred to as the intersection of the West and the East, can help make visible the ways in which colonialism has shaped the ways we have historically engaged, and in many cases continue to engage, in literacy education and writing research in Western contexts.

In his book, *Learning to Divide the World*, Willinsky (1998) demonstrated how Christianity and Western education worked in tandem to support colonialism and the “moral economy of empire” (p. 91). Colonial schools, Willinsky explained, were both removed from but implicated in empire in that they insisted on the production and spread of a particular kind of knowledge, which created “peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nation” that continue to exist today (pp. 2–3). While Willinsky’s focus was on schools established within colonial outposts, his larger point still applies to the Protestant and Jesuit schools that were established around the world outside of official Western spheres of influence—as was the case of American Protestant mission schools in the Ottoman Empire. The missionaries who established these schools did so not as the result of an official mandate or in the interest of empire, but because they sincerely believed that God had called them to spread the “good word” around the world. But, as this chapter shows, their methods were largely informed by colonial epistemologies, which assumed that Christian and Western ways of knowing were superior to the local population’s beliefs, values, and knowledge. In other words, it was a colonial mindset that allowed missionaries to justify their work, to cast judgment on the populations that hosted them, and to insist that others adopt (or pretend to adopt) these epistemologies in order to access the resources offered by the missionaries.

In order to understand the significance of Syrian Protestant College (SPC) as a site of colonial literacy education, it is necessary to recognize the broader context and epistemological currents in which the institution was founded. In this chapter, therefore, I first provide an overview of the geopolitical context, including relevant social and educational developments in 19th-century Ottoman Empire and Syria. Because SPC was founded by American Protestant missionaries, I next provide a history of Christian missions in the region and discuss how the mission context led to the establishment of SPC.

The Larger Geopolitical Context

SPC was located in Syria (present-day Lebanon), in the Beirut *wilaya* (state). At the time of the college's founding in 1866, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. In this section, I provide an overview of the political, social, and educational history of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of great change and precarity. The period between 1839 and 1876, known as the Tanzimat period, promoted societal reforms and relatively modern ideas such as the right to life, property, and honor, as well as equality of all men regardless of religion (Faroqhi, 2004/2009; Masters, 2013). Changes in property law led to the privatization of land and creation of large estates. Bureaucracy was modernized during the Tanzimat and throughout the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid between 1876–1909. For example, the Tanzimat ushered in modernizations such as paper money, taxation, post offices, a census, identity cards, telegraphs, modern universities, and ministries of education and healthcare.

The Ottomans were economically and politically tied to Europe throughout the 19th century (Masters, 2013). The Anglo-Ottoman Treaty of 1838 ensured Britain's support in reclaiming Syria during Egypt's occupation of the region. Further, trade tended to privilege Europe, and British traders could settle anywhere in the Empire without paying taxes. France and Britain allied with the Empire against Russia in the mid-century Crimean War. Manufacturers entered the global market and took on debt. The Empire's bankruptcy in 1875 meant an increased reliance on Europe to address the debt; the Ottoman Public Debt Administration was created in 1881 and was managed by several European countries.

Inspired by democratic ideals spreading throughout Europe at the time, a group known as the Young Ottomans briefly worked with Abdulhamid to establish a constitution and Parliament in 1876, but both were dissolved by the Sultan in 1878. Abdulhamid retained his power until 1908, when the Young Turks staged a revolution and took power. World War I brought the dissolution of the empire.

Islam was a major political ideology in the Empire. At the same time, Christians and other non-Muslim religious groups—many of whom lived in the Balkans, Greece, Syria, Armenia, Kurdistan, and Palestine—were officially granted equal protection in 1839 via the Edict of Gülhane and sovereignty in 1856 via the Reform Edict. This commitment was made partly under pressure from Britain and France after their support during the Crimean War and partly to secure the support of the Empire's non-Muslim citizens as the Empire's strength waned—in other words, the Tanzimat reforms were a matter of survival for the Empire. However, the relationship among different Ottoman subjects and the Empire was complex. As Masters (2013) explained it:

The Ottoman regime equally exploited all of its subjects ... for the revenues they might produce and considered them to be a largely undifferentiated mass of taxpayers. Exploitation and coercion went hand in hand to establish and maintain the Ottoman Empire, as was the case with other empires. At the same time, however, its survival over time required the cooperation and collaboration of at least some of the subject peoples. In that regard, the invocation of Islam as a political ideology was crucial as far as many Arabs were concerned. (p. 5)

In other words, Islam operated at an ideological level to provoke a sense of unity and support from the Empire's Muslim subjects, even as they were spread across a large geography.

There were major cultural divides between the rich and the poor in the Empire during this period, but a rising middle class in the latter half of the 19th century proved to be important for sociopolitical change. The biggest development within the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century, according to Benjamin Fortna (2002), was the competition that came from within the Empire and not from outside of its borders; this was an experience that was markedly different from the experiences in Russia, China, and Japan:

What was once a traditional military confrontation fought along a more or less distinct frontier was emerging in the modern era [within the Ottoman Empire] as a battle being waged internally for the hearts and minds of the population. The massive underlying economic imbalance ensured that this battle favored those who could marshal the various manifestations of technology (steamships, printing presses, etc.) to their own advantage. (p. 84)

In other words, the wealthy of the Ottoman Empire used the tools and technology of modernity to create economic competition domestically and

to maintain power. While modernity is often conceived of as a Western construction, Ussama Makdisi (2011) argued that, for better or worse, the emergence of liberalism and modernity in the Arab context was simultaneous to, rather than after, Western constructions of the same (p. 216).

Greater Syria in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire

Prior to the Tanzimat period, three major metropolitan areas in the Middle East were important for the Ottoman Empire: “Damascus ... was the city from which was organized the Pilgrimage ..., Aleppo [was] the centre of international trade, [and from] Baghdad ... the frontiers with Persia must be defended” (Hourani, 1983, p. 32). Outside of major urban areas such as Beirut and Damascus, a localized form of feudalism prevailed, and the mountains of Lebanon, Palestine, and Kurdistan governed themselves.

During the Tanzimat period, the Empire gained greater control over Arabic-speaking regions, including Greater Syria, a region which included present-day Lebanon, Syria, and occupied Palestine. An ongoing power struggle between Egypt and the Empire led Egypt to occupy Syria between 1832 and 1840. European powers held a stake in the conflict, with France and Spain supporting Egypt in its occupation but Britain, Austria, and Russia supporting the Empire. The 1839–1840 war in Syria led to a resolution of the crisis with Britain promising Egypt its autonomy. After the war, Arabs were conscripted to local armies, which provided a new sense of security in the region but also led to resentment among the local populations.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Syria housed a variety of religious groups (including Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholics, Druze, and Sunni and Shia’a Muslims), and various European powers held a stake in the well-being of groups that they saw as important to their influence within the Near (Middle) East. Between 1840 and 1860, the Ottoman Empire tried to exert direct control over the region through centralization, ending the traditional independence of areas such as Mount Lebanon, which is located in the middle of present-day Lebanon. As a result of these pressures, religious identity increased and became politicized. In Mount Lebanon, where the Druze claimed power, the number of Maronites increased, as did their wealth through the production of silk. Meanwhile, the Druze permitted Protestant Christian missionaries from America and Britain to enter Mount Lebanon, leading to further tension with the Maronites, who viewed the missionaries’ presence as a threat. The British supported the Druze with arms, and France and Austria helped protect the Maronites.

The Ottomans' efforts to control the region led to changes in the political and economic conditions, such as competition over land. The Empire split Mount Lebanon into two political units—the northern one governed by a Christian and the southern one governed by a Druze—both responsible to the Beirut governor. The Empire's efforts to intervene in Mount Lebanon resulted in conflict between the Maronites and the Druze, culminating in the 1860 war, which resulted in between 7,000 and 20,000 casualties and the Druze claiming victory ("1860 civil conflict," 2025). The developments between 1840 and 1860 signaled the advent of political sectarianism that persists in the region even today (Makdisi, 2000; Masters, 2013). According to Makdisi (2000), sectarianism "emerged when the old regime of Mount Lebanon, which was dominated by an elite hierarchy in which secular rank rather than religious affiliation defined politics, was discredited in the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 6).

After the 1860 Druze-Maronite war, French troops arrived in Beirut as part of a "humanitarian" expedition under Napoleon III—a move that foreshadowed the creation of the French (colonial) Mandate in Lebanon after the First World War. To prevent the control of Syria by France, other European powers—including Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria—brokered a peace agreement with the Ottoman Empire, allowing European troops (half of them French) to occupy the district of Mount Lebanon and restore order. The *Règlement Organique*, or Organic Regulation, not only normalized the presence of foreign military powers in the area, but it also gave autonomy to the Mount Lebanon *mutasarrifate*, or district), which was to be, from that point forward, under the control of a Christian governor.¹

The Beirut *wilaya* or *vilayet* (administrative division similar to a state) was, according to Rashid Khalidi (1991b), much less conservative and more diverse than interior parts of Syria. Between 1865 and 1915, Beirut experienced a rapid rise in population, doubling to 175,000 and becoming the third largest city in the region by 1914. Meanwhile, an 1864 law gave power to Arab Muslim elites, and local government news began to be transmitted in Arabic. There were also networks of communication and influence between Beirut and Cairo in the second half of the 19th century. There was a long history of trade and intellectual influence, as well as Syrian emigration to Cairo from the eighteenth century on.

Ethnic and Religious Identity Within the Ottoman Empire

The question of how Arab subjects in the Ottoman Empire defined themselves in relation to the Empire as well as Europe is challenging, and any

1 Mount Lebanon today comprises the central part of the modern state of Lebanon.

answers must be understood as highly nuanced. Some contemporary historians have criticized how Arab identity has been presented previously through an Orientalist lens. For example, Franck Salameh (2010) argued that the idea of the “Arab world” is a “Western caricature of a Western concept of identity that was never extant in the Middle East” (p. xiii). He suggested that such efforts to generalize the people who occupy the region, today or in the past, fundamentally relies on a Western understanding of national identity, where language is often conflated with citizenship and belonging. Instead, “[i]n both the ancient and modern Middle East, assortments of cultural and ethnic groups have always wielded the languages of their times’ dominant civilizations, without necessarily merging into those civilizations and integrating the latter’s ethnic and cultural parameters” (Salameh, 2010, p. 3). Masters (2001) noted, also, that some historians who have written about religious minorities in the Empire tended to be biased against Muslims and did not recognize the ties among Muslims, Jews, Christians, and other groups, whereas others, while not anti-Muslim, promoted Arab nationalism by insisting that the Empire was inherently imperialist and oppressive (pp. 2–3). Neither view fully captures the complexity of Arab identity in the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the dynamic 19th century.

Masters (2001) argued that religion was at the heart of identity in the Ottoman Empire around the turn of the 19th century, and religion was tied to politics as well. Identity was often literally marked by clothing; for example, Muslim women wore the hijab, while non-Muslims wore blue or black clothing or red shoes, or they were not allowed to wear green clothing or white turbans (pp. 5–6). According to Masters (2013), Muslim Arabs did not view or describe themselves as occupied, but they identified with a cultural heritage distinct from their colonizers. They had already been occupied prior to the Ottomans, so switching to an Ottoman sultan in 1453 was not a significant change locally. Just as empires have always relied on their subjects to support colonization, urban, elite Muslim Arabs can be seen as collaborators in the imperial project. During the early part of the Empire’s occupation of the region, this elite group benefited from the occupation and gained wealth; in the 19th and 20th centuries, they supported the status quo for their advantage, and they shared a religious identity with their colonizers (pp. 7–8).

Historians generally agree that Middle Eastern culture was heterogeneous and always changing. It is impossible to generalize, but Muslims tended to be less likely to accept innovations such as Western education or political ideology, and Christians, too, were uneven in their acceptance of change (Masters, 2001, p. 7). Muslim and non-Muslim Arab elites in the region avoided violence by choosing to adopt a secular political identity (p. 9). North African

and Egyptian subjects did not always see themselves as Arab; Egyptian culture and citizenship was understood as distinct from the rest of the Near East (Masters, 2013, p. 205). Within the Empire, European influence was the strongest in Syria; it was Syrian Christians and Jews who were primarily responsible for bringing Western knowledge to the region (Masters, 2001, p. 14). John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Henry Huxley—representing “scientific knowledge, industry, and constitutional government”—influenced Christian intellectuals in particular (Sharabi, 1970, pp. 60–61, 68–70). While some Jewish people were interested in Arab identity, most preferred separatism (Masters, 2001, p. 174).

Christians began to imagine themselves as Arab around the second half of the 19th century, when they began “to study and learnt to appreciate the classics of Arabic literature With that newly acquired appreciation, many in the Arab Christian elite started to define themselves culturally as Arabs with an acquired pride in a brilliant literary past that they acknowledged as shared with, and produced by, the ancestors of their Muslim neighbors” (Masters, 2001, p. 173). This new identification is known as the *al-Nahda* (the renaissance) and led some to support a universal Arab nationalism that would connect them more deeply with their Muslim neighbors. At around the same time, Muslim scholars in the *salafiyya* movement sought to marry Islamic values with modern (Western) culture. These scholars were well aware of European Orientalists who saw Islam as responsible for the region’s “backwards” culture. Ultimately, *salafiyya* intellectuals hoped to recast Islam as progressive and meld it with Western technological, scientific, and socio-political advances (Masters, 2013, pp. 202–203). While the *salafiyya* movement generally did not support the idea of a new Arab state, as some Christians did, both movements signified “the emergence of an Arab cultural consciousness among Arabic-speaking elites” (Masters, 2001, p. 175).

By the end of the 19th century, Muslim Arabs expressed less confidence in the security and stability provided by the Empire. They were conscripted into military service in various Ottoman wars (such as the 1877 Russo-Turkish War and World War I), and national and ethnic difference was promoted over religious faith, leading Arab Muslims to feel marginalized in relation to their Turkish counterparts (Masters, 2013, p. 19). At the same time, the majority of Arabs in the Middle East, including Christians, were not eager to see the end of the Ottoman Empire—they saw the British and other European powers as a threat to their culture and identity, and many held out hope that change could occur from within (p. 193).

The turn of the 20th century also saw the rise of a new, elite middle class (Khalidi, 1991b, pp. 63–65; Masters, 2013, p. 195). In Syria, this group

was comprised of those newly educated in modern institutions, bringing new skills and expectations to the social sphere. This group—which comprised approximately 10% of the total population—in turn changed politics. Increased press freedom and political activity characterized Syrian culture during the few years prior to the Great War.

Arab Nationalism

Nationalism was on the rise throughout the Ottoman Empire during the post-Tanzimat period, particularly for those residents who were not part of the Muslim *umma* (community of believers), such as the Greeks and Armenians. Even Muslims, however, began to differentiate themselves along Western political categories; references to “Turk” changed from meaning any Muslim to people who specifically spoke Turkish (Masters, 2001, pp. 10–11). Sultan Abdulhamid promoted the Ottomans’ traditional references to Islamic solidarity; however, a secular Turkish nationalism—popularized by the Young Ottomans in 1875 and later the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the Young Turk movement—emerged out of opposition to his reign.

Syrian Arabs, such as Butrus al-Bustani and Rashid Rida, were supportive of these nationalist movements and saw Arabic as a language that could unify otherwise disparate groups traditionally defined by religious identity. Masters (2001) attributed Arab nationalism, which brought Muslim and Christian elites together in recognition of a shared identity, for the dissolution of tensions in Syria after 1860 (pp. 172–173). In general, Arabic-language newspapers and books in the second half of the 19th century supported new understandings and constructions of an Arab past (p. 178). Arab nationalism was in many ways unique within the Empire, as other groups who could have unified through a shared ethnic or cultural identity chose instead to emphasize religion or sect (Masters, 2013, p. 206). Indeed, Arab Ottoman subjects took pride in their cultural history, no matter their religious background (Masters, 2013, pp. 204–205). Arab nationalism grew, but so did other senses of nationalism, such as Lebanese and Syrian nationalism (Faroghi, 2004/2009, pp. 129–130; Hourani, 1983, pp. 100–102, 285, 299). Although Arab nationalism gradually gained in popularity—reaching a peak around the 1930s (Salameh, 2010, p. 8)—writers around the turn of the 20th century advocated, in various ways, for “a transformation of Arab society rather than a major social or political revolution” (Masters, 2001, p. 197).

Several developments during and after World War I heightened Arab peoples’ attunement to Arab nationalism, including the 1916 Arab Revolt, in which Arab and British forces defeated the Ottomans (Dawn, 1991, p. 23).

Later, the division of much of the region into “mandates” governed by Britain and France through the Sykes-Picot Agreement complicated the idea of nationality and disrupted Arab peoples’ understanding of themselves as Ottoman subjects (Masters, 2001, p. 187). As a result, many in Syria supported Faisal I—a figure who promoted pan-Arab nationalism and who became King of Iraq—as king of the Arab Kingdom, which would have included Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, rather than the French and British occupation of the region (pp. 187–88).

Education in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire

During the 19th century, elementary education in the Ottoman Empire was mostly private, with Quranic schools (*medreses*) and Christian parochial schools, including missionary schools, available to students. State secondary education emerged slowly: public Muslim elementary and middle schools were formed during Abdulhamid’s governance (Faroghi, 2004/2009). No modern Ottoman-run universities existed until 1900; the first was the Imperial University [*Darülfünûn-u Şahâne*], which today is Istanbul University [*İstanbul Darülfünûnu*] (Faroghi, 2004/2009; Istanbul University, 2025). Part of the reason for the slower educational development in the Empire during the 19th century is because bureaucrats worried that education would increase the chances of student revolts as nationalist ideology grew throughout the Empire (Faroghi, 2004/2009).

Fortna (2002) argued that the Ottoman state’s decisions regarding education were not wholly influenced by the West nor particularly alien to it. The Empire was influenced by Enlightenment ideals of progress, with the difference in the Empire being the integration of Islamic and Ottoman values. The educational project was not secular (p. 3). The Ottomans recognized the competition brought by missionary and local minority groups’ schools, as well as education offered by nearby countries (pp. 8–9). During the Tanzimat period, the French educational model was imported with few alterations into the Empire, but Sultan Abdulhamid II viewed this system with caution and made changes to realign education with Ottoman values and policies while also dramatically expanding public education (pp. 9–12).

The changes in the Empire at this time were part of a much larger global trend. France, Russia, Japan, and the Ottomans all saw educational transformations in the late 19th century, which suggests that the influence of the West within the Empire should be understood but not exaggerated or assumed to be unidirectional. Indeed, education was understood as a source of optimism: “Like their counterparts elsewhere, Ottoman educators believed that public

education would solve a host of problems, ranging from those of economic and military competitiveness, to those relating to manpower, social control, cultural identification, and political loyalty” (Fortna, 2002, p. 30).

The Empire moved toward educational reformation partly in order to resist the West—by borrowing from the West (Fortna, 2002, pp. 32–35). However, there was also a belief that traditional Islamic education (the *medrese* system) was not strong enough to remain competitive on a global scale. Because the Ottomans did not have a pre-existing system of public education, they had to create one. Bureaucrats were concerned about the threat to Ottoman identity across the Empire, and education was one way in which to create a sense of shared identity; this was not very different from similar nationalizing efforts occurring in the United States and Russia at the same time. Fortna (2002) noted, “Such simultaneity suggests that there was a common world-time reaction to the perceived speeding up of time” (p. 40). Change was motivated in large part by fear—of modernity, ideological battles, falling behind, and losing culture or identity. In the Ottoman context, the threats were magnified, and some—such as missionaries—seemed stronger than the Ottomans themselves (Fortna, 2002, pp. 43–45).

Education, Literacy, and the Press in 19th-Century Syria

The 19th century was characterized by a rapid rise of access to education and literacy, as well as press activity, in Syria. In the early 19th century, Catholic and Protestant missions established schools and brought European languages and ideas to the region. American missionaries helped to modernize the Arabic language through their translation of the Bible, for which Butrus al-Bustani, an early Protestant convert, is credited. In the 1888 *wilaya* (state) of Beirut, which included Latakia, Tripoli, Mount Lebanon, and Nablus, there were five French and four British schools, with approximately 4,400 students enrolled (Fortna, 2002, pp. 51–53). American missionary schools, as well as Italian and German state schools and Maronite, Greek Catholic, and Greek Orthodox schools, enrolled around 500 students in total, 90% of whom were Ottomans. The Empire was concerned about foreign influence within the schools and began to establish national schools, with the number of state schools rising from 153 in 1886 to 359 in 1914 (Khalidi, 1991b, p. 56). Prior to the Great War, literacy rates outside of cities ranged from 10 to 20 percent (Masters, 2013, p. 196).

Prior to the 1860s, newspapers were published primarily by the government in Ottoman Turkish or French, as well as in minority languages, in Constantinople and Egypt. Little was published in Arabic or in Syria. However, the 1870s saw the publication of two new kinds of periodicals in Arabic:

the independent political newspaper and the literary/scientific periodical, the latter of which translated European and American ideas into Arabic. Published in both Syria and Egypt, many of these periodicals were led by Syrians who had been educated in French and American schools, including Ya'qub Sarruf and Faris Nimr (*al-Muqtataf*), Jurji Zeidan (*al-Hilal*), Farah Antun (*al-Jami'a*), and Bustani (*al-Jinan*) (Hourani, 1983, pp. 245–47, 263; see also Sharabi, 1970, and Khalidi, 1991b). Literary societies and clubs also existed in Syria around the turn of the 20th century (Sharabi, 1970). Books—ranging from reproductions of Arab classics, translations of Western work, or new culturally significant tomes—became widely accessible in the late 19th century and were often summarized in Arabic-language newspapers or taught in schools (Masters, 2001, pp. 204–205). Ultimately, writing in Arabic circulated widely within the region, particularly between Syria and Egypt, from the late 19th century onward.

Historicizing 19th-Century American Protestant Missions

It is in the context of the Ottoman Empire that SPC was established in 1866 by a group of American Protestant missionaries. To fully appreciate the significance of SPC as a site of colonial literacy education, it is necessary to also understand the longer history of Protestant missions during this time period. Therefore, in this section, I provide an overview of the Protestant missionary movement, zeroing in on the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), as it emerged and grew throughout the 19th century.

Protestant missionary movements emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in both American and British contexts. Multiple missionary organizations were born around the turn of the 20th century, including the Baptist Missionary Society in London in 1792, the Church Missionary Society in Britain in 1799, the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews in 1809, the ABCFM in Boston in 1810, the American Bible Society in 1816, and the American Tract Society in 1825 (Haselby, 2015; Masters, 2001). These movements were connected to the Second Great Awakening, a populist evangelical movement centered primarily in the United States that focused on elevating religious fervor and spreading Christianity beyond the Anglo-Saxon Atlantic region. In the context of growing literacy, ordinary laypeople could join missions if they felt “called” by God to do so, and those who did not could still support these organizations financially.

In the context of the United States, Protestant missionary organizations particularly gained momentum in the New England region, where, post-American Revolution, the people holding much of the nation's wealth

also enjoyed a sense of manifest destiny. Many Protestants at the time were Calvinists (represented in denominations such as Presbyterian, Reformed Anglican, and Congregationalist) and socially conservative. At the time, schools were supposed to maintain the social order and propagate religion. The clergy and upper social classes controlled education. Literacy was necessary for religious instruction and to fulfill the demands of social class; education was not associated with social mobility in part because it was not open to all (Lindsay, 1965, pp. 32–33). Schools were believed to be socializing and corrective institutions. American colleges, which in the early 19th century were primarily located in the Northeast, imported Enlightenment ideologies. Mathematics, classics, and languages were all believed to be important for “mental discipline” and civic life; however, the introduction of the scientific method challenged Calvinists because it seemed to threaten the authority of scripture. The most conservative theories of education influenced missionary training in this context.

For Haselby (2015), Northeastern Protestants distorted the history of religion in America, saying that missionary work was a part of that history, even though American Christianity had previously been focused on developing and guiding its communities rather than orienting itself outwards. In other words, around the turn of the 19th century, Protestants in New England began to connect nationality with missionary work (pp. 193–194). This link led to the proliferation of Protestant missionary organizations—between 1787 and 1827, 933 Protestant missionary or “moral improvement” societies were founded by New Englanders (p. 59). The missions movement ultimately helped solidify religious nationalism in early America (p. 58).

Haselby (2015) argued that the post-Revolutionary group the Connecticut (later Hartford) Wits was the group primarily responsible for establishing the connection between American nationalism and evangelicalism. For the Wits, the “national empire became the community through which one sought salvation” (p. 58). These elitist Yale graduates believed they would play a pivotal role in deciding American culture, leading educational institutions and government based on their specific bourgeoisie understanding of manners and taste (p. 52). Indeed, one member of this group, Timothy Dwight, became the president of Yale in 1795. Yale and other elite Northeastern colleges, including Amherst, Princeton, Columbia, and Andover Theological Seminary held a leading role in “contribut[ing] men, ideas, and money to the missions movement” around the turn of the 19th century, as the missions movement grew (p. 199). The largest American missions organizations, established in the early 19th century, were similarly elitist and nationalist. According to Haselby (2015), “they enjoyed an acute sense of posterity, planned for the distant future,

and thought of themselves, accurately, in elitist and nationalist terms, as the leading Americans” (pp. 256–257). They understood themselves as distinct from (and higher than) those they sought to reach through their proselytization—an unsurprising attitude in the context of colonial American culture.

Taking advantage of the rise of print culture in the 19th century, American Protestant missionary organizations produced a barrage of religious literature that simultaneously conjured up an image of America as a nation bound together by shared religious principles (Haselby, 2015, pp. 235, 249–251). Organizations such as the American Tract Society and the ABCFM—supported primarily by business and religious leaders in the Northeast—aimed to distribute religious tracts to every American household and across the frontier. Their goal was to create a common religious discourse—“a complete chain of communication”—across the country (pp. 261–62). Such work, religious leaders at the time believed, had the power to dismantle the separation of social classes. Thus, these missionary organizations can be understood as “creat[ing] American mass media. Their pamphlets and periodicals were the first media conceived of and produced for the general American population” (p. 262). They played a clear role in linking the nation with an imagined America.

Missions, Nationalism, and Colonialism

America was still a young country at the beginning of the 19th century, and the idea of American nationalism, according to Haselby (2015), was not set in stone (p. 59). The American missions movement took advantage of this uncertainty, creating strategic—but as mentioned earlier, historically inaccurate—connections between the new nation and Christian obligations to spread Christianity throughout the world. At least among Protestants in the Northeast, there was a shared belief in American exceptionalism—the idea that God had chosen American Christians to play a special role in history—which helped spur the missions movement forward and solidified Christian definitions of American nationalism (pp. 200–201).

While it can be tempting to see 19th century missions as inherently colonial or imperialist, scholarship suggests that there was a great deal of heterogeneity within missions, and many were motivated by a sense of altruism rather than a specific desire to colonize (Harris, 1999; Kieser, 2002; Makdisi, 2011; Porter, 2002; Tejirian & Simon, 2002). The sociohistorical context in which any given mission operated also complexifies any discussion about missions and their effects. However, as Eleanor Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon (2002) noted, the underlying logic for Protestant missions was colonial: “The ... goal, for all Christians, was the establishment of a worldwide

kingdom and the missionaries were a major force for education about what came to be regarded as the ‘developing world’—with both positive and negative consequences (p. vii). For example, Christian missionaries have been credited with creating the conditions for the emergence of an Arab nationalism, while others have criticized missions, rightly, for their inherently colonial and ethnocentric views (p. vii). Tejirian and Simon (2002) credited missions for raising public awareness about other regions of the world, including the Middle East, in the United States, which in turn has influenced U.S. foreign policy, for better or worse (p. ix).

Similarly, while acknowledging the damaging and destructive consequences that often occurred because of missions, Andrew Porter (2002) resisted an inherently negative view of missions, in which “any instance where awareness of the wider world of the West has influenced cultural change” (p. 9) is understood as problematic. Instead, he argued, those instances of cross-cultural interaction that lie at the heart of missions should be investigated critically for both positive and negative effects. Makdisi (2011) also argued that the history of Protestant missions highlights the ways in which colonialism has historically failed to achieve its goals, noting that while missionaries’ views were deeply inflected by colonial epistemology, they viewed their work abroad as “ostensibly free of the entanglements and corruptions of American colonialism and Western empire” (p. 11). In other words, he suggested that it is worth paying attention to the ways in which the colonial epistemology underlying the Protestant missionary movement was challenged and disrupted in overseas contexts.

In reality, no matter what missionaries believed about the separation between their work overseas and the unpleasant realities, American Protestant missionary organizations like the ABCFM were inevitably tied to settler colonialism. Some of the first American Protestant missionary projects were directed toward Native American populations. This “vexed relationship with power at home inevitably framed the perceptions and expectations of foreign fields,” particularly in places where “American power was notably absent” such as the Middle East and Africa (Makdisi, 2011, p. 11). In other words, the epistemology that justified settler colonialism in the United States—suggesting that Indigenous populations and their land were inherently subordinate to the ways of life and desires of Anglo-Europeans—also shaped American missionaries’ worldviews as they moved abroad. Missionaries to the American frontier undoubtedly held mixed feelings about the U.S. government’s violent efforts to relocate Native Americans, and some supported Indigenous peoples as they resisted these efforts. In the Ottoman Empire, a region where America had almost no stake or power, American missionaries were freed

from the political and moral complications and challenges that they faced in their work on the frontier, even as they carried colonial epistemologies to new sites of proselytization.

No matter their benevolent intentions, the mission project in any context took as a given Christianity's—and the West's—inherent superiority, and this assumption necessarily shaped the relationship between missionaries and (potential) converts. While American missionaries were not formally connected to European or American colonial projects, they benefited from the environment that Western colonialism created. This gave strength to their work in contexts such as the Ottoman Empire (Makdisi, 2011, p. 176). What's more, missionaries operated from the same cultural and epistemological frame of their Western colonialist counterparts. In his study of the history of the ABCFM, Paul Willaim Harris (1999) wrote, "American Board missions might act quite independently of the Western powers, might even act to wean their converts from dependence and promote their autonomy, and yet they still acted like colonialists" (p. 111). We see in the missionary project, then, the intractability of colonial logics, which—like invasive plants—reproduce and sustain systems of power.

Along the same lines, Porter (2002) pointed out that empires have held together not only through political and economic domination, but also through culture and epistemology. Missions parroted, produced, and sustained colonial discourse, which in turn constructed social hierarchies—including religious ones—in line with and in support of the greater colonial project. Porter (2002) argued that "the global expansion of evangelical Protestant activity not only reflected the worldwide distribution of relative material power. It assisted the definition of distinct religions, with clear theological boundaries and in competition with one another" (pp. 7–8). The construction of such distinctions allowed for some religious beliefs and practices to be named as superior to others, supporting the spread of colonial epistemology.

Missions and Local Populations

The history of missions in relation to Indigenous peoples in the United States provides important context for the orientation of American Protestant missionaries overseas, because the colonial logics that justified evangelism at home carried over to their approach abroad. Much more is known today than previously about the problematic history of the education of Indigenous peoples in the United States. Missionary organizations are deeply implicated in this history; the schools that they established in the early 19th century under the mantle of proselytization were precursors to the boarding schools

established and supported by the federal government beginning in 1860. These schools are known today as instruments of genocide, in which Native people's culture, language, and humanity was violently oppressed.

According to Haselby (2015), missionaries initially set out to integrate Native Americans into U.S. society, believing that their primary focus should be to "civilize" before attempting to convert. In a forerunner to the government's boarding school movement, "earlier Anglo-American missions had taken 'the most promising children' from many 'tribes' and focused on their religious indoctrination" (p. 296). However, missionaries found that focusing on religion proved ineffective, because when these "purportedly indoctrinated Indians were sent back, as young adults, 'to their native tribes,' wrote a missionary, they 'became *Indians* again"—as though these students' cultural and ethnic identities were merely social characteristics that could be removed and put back on like clothing (p. 296). In the view of these early missionaries, religious indoctrination was unsuccessful because of Native Americans' supposed lack of "civilization"—they believed that Native American culture itself needed to change before they would be able to adopt Christianity, which in their view was a "civilized" religion.

It is important to recognize that American Protestant missionaries' views of Native Americans and enslaved peoples was more nuanced than a simple sense of superiority. According to Haselby (2015), American Protestants generally combined nationalism with liberalism to see those outside of the Anglo-American community as divinely subjugated—that is, Protestants saw Indigenous peoples and slaves as endowed with a special spiritual primacy by virtue of their suffering. At the same time, of course, many Protestants viewed these groups as lacking "civility" according to their own Anglo-Christian standards, and therefore not equal. In other words, Protestants' perceptions of these groups were heterogeneous: Some saw and spoke out about the injustices inherent to the slave trade and the relocation of Native Americans, while others articulated justifications of inequality in their religious literature (Haselby, 2015, p. 268). Such justifications would have been supported in 19th century popular magazines, which highlighted scientific "proof" that attributed various mental and physical differences to race. Importantly, not everyone at the time believed that these differences were genetically transmitted, which offered the possibility of change—these beliefs justified missionaries' and educators' continuing efforts to convert and civilize these groups (Spack, 2002, p. 31).

In considering the relationship of missionaries with Native Americans, it is also important to remember that Native people were not harmoniously living with each other before settlers moved in and that they had agency in relation to missions. While missionaries took advantage of the existing

tensions among different Indigenous groups to win allies and converts, Indigenous peoples also made use of these tensions for their own advantage. As Harris (1999) pointed out, “the Indigenous clients of the American Board were quite capable of borrowing selectively and wisely from the West,” and indeed made use of the resources provided by missions for their own purposes (p. 8). Mary Stuckey and John Murphy (2001), too, noted that “the Indigenous peoples of the Americas accepted those elements of Christianity that caused the least damage to their resident cultures, while their ‘conversion’ may have helped them to resist the imposition of other elements of the colonial culture” (p. 76). We must therefore understand local populations as having some agency in relation to missions; the relationship, while often manipulated in favor of the missionaries, was never unidirectional.

Whatever agency local populations may have had, missionaries’ complex, and often contradictory, perspectives about non-Anglo cultures, religions, and races were carried with them overseas. These perspectives also defined their relationships to the communities within which they settled. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, missionaries viewed Islam as inherently hostile to Christianity. Even as they developed good relationships with individual Muslims, “in their letters [the missionaries] spoke of systematically penetrating and ‘occupying’ Ottoman lands as if they were enemy territories” (Kieser, 2002, p. 145). These characterizations of Islam and Muslims intertwined with racist ideology and nationalist rhetoric of 19th-century America, resulting in discourse that “increasingly idealized America, orientalized the East, and presumed to speak for the natives in a conversation about missions conducted mainly with American critics and supporters rather than with the people the missionaries had ostensibly come to save” (Makdisi, 2011, p. 13). Missionaries in the Ottoman Empire perceived the local culture as corrupt based in part on their perceptions of women’s status and also a lack of “modern (Western) furniture, education, medicine, and knowledge” (Makdisi, 2000, pp. 89–90). In contrast to their approach to Native Americans, however, missionaries overseas attempted at first to provide education that would align with local customs and values. Their justification was still colonial, however, in that they withheld education about Western life and customs because they believed that the West would be too appealing. Missionaries abroad wanted converts to stay in the region and evangelize rather than leaving (Lindsay, 1965; Makdisi, 2000, pp. 89–90).

Missions and Language

Missionaries regularly studied and documented language, and they debated about which language was “best” to achieve their proselytization goals. This

adds another complicating factor when considering Protestant missions' role in colonization. Evangelicals sought to transmit—inoculate—Christian (Western) beliefs and values to the Indigenous population; they were the “human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview ... engag[ing] [Indigenous peoples] in a web of symbolic and material transactions that would bind them ever more securely to the colonizing culture” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991, as cited in Porter, 2002, p. 8). How best to inoculate their targets was an open question, and ultimately, in some contexts, neither the locals' home language(s) nor English produced a great number of converts. Many 18th- and 19th-century missionaries were highly educated (at a time when higher education was rare), and with this education they became what we would today call linguists and anthropologists. Some saw their primary work as documenting—literally transcribing—Indigenous languages and cultures around the world. They used this linguistic and anthropological knowledge not only to support their evangelical work in the field, but also to educate Western populations about non-Western cultures and ways of life.

Part of the project of Protestant evangelism, then, relied on articulating not only religious difference but also linguistic difference—and this articulation of difference contributed to the colonial social hierarchy that missionaries sought to maintain. It is important to remember that American missions emerged within multilingual contexts where English was not inevitable and was not intrinsically tied to the nation.² At the same time, as I discuss more deeply in Chapter 3, English was promoted by both Protestant missionaries and local populations as a valuable commodity, one that the missionaries could choose to share or not, depending on how they viewed the mission's purpose.³ Some American missionary organizations, including the ABCFM, grounded their early educational programs on the belief that their targets would adopt Christianity (and in turn become more “civilized”) if they were

2 As Kimball (2021) pointed out, the English-only ideology that permeates American educational and cultural contexts today was not inevitable. The government-sponsored Americanization movement of the early 20th century likely helped cement the connection between nation and language in the US, as it sponsored English-language teaching for immigrant and Native communities. Spack (2002) pointed out that this movement offered many promises through the English language that were not ultimately fulfilled: “The reality of the Americanization movement was that Native people were being asked to reject the ways of their ancestors and families without being offered the benefits of full participation in the European American way of life” (pp. 37–38).

3 For more historical context about this tension as it arose in the context of the British Empire, see Stephen Evans (2002) on the English Education Act of 1835, and also see Willinsky (1998, pp. 97–98).

exposed to scripture in their native languages.⁴ At the same time, other missionaries in the early 19th century believed in—and asserted—the superiority of English as a vehicle of a more “civilized” Anglo-Saxon culture. In the context of missions targeting Native American communities, the 19th-century doctrine of individualism, reinforced by Darwinism, promoted the belief that “English was ... capable of breaking [the] barrier [of communalism in Native tribes] and thus of improving students’ lives” (Spack, 2002, p. 29).⁵ It is evident that, no matter the approach to the medium of instruction taken by missions during the 19th century, all approaches are founded on colonial epistemologies that assert and maintain the superiority of the West.

Missionaries’ articulation of religious, cultural, and linguistic differences was also inevitably tied to constructions of race and racial hierarchies. Within the context of the British Protestant mission, “[d]oubts were often expressed as to the ability of Indigenous peoples to attain the ethical standards acceptable as the hallmark of genuine conversion Racial concern often underlay missionary reluctance ... to surrender control and authority to local Christians” (Porter, 2002, p. 12). Such racial differentiation was not, of course, limited to British Protestants—in any foreign mission context, missionaries generally shared a common belief in the superiority of the Anglo-European “race” and its culture and, according to Kieser (2002), a rigid understanding of what constituted appropriate beliefs and behaviors (p. 162).

Even facing these beliefs, however, local populations must be understood as having agency in the context of English-language education. They made use of and negotiated colonizers’ languages (including English), as well as missions’ transcription of Native languages (Porter, 2002, p. 9; Spack, 2002, p. 11). Spack (2002) saw this agency as decidedly translingual and transcultural, providing the Native American students she focused on in her study with the tools to understand the discourse used to describe them and, in turn, to take up the work of representing themselves in the language

4 This approach was reinforced under the oversight of Rufus Anderson, secretary of ABCFM from 1832-1866. He favored vernacular education because it saved money for the mission and also maintained Western hierarchies of power. Students who learned English were more marketable for jobs outside of the mission and therefore were less likely to remain in their home regions. This disrupted Anderson’s three-self doctrine of producing self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches. Additionally, students who learned English might eventually consider themselves equal to the missionaries and demand similar salaries and lifestyles if they remained (Harris, 1999, p. 8).

5 Haselby (2015) notes that this attention to language—in the Native American context—was coupled with a conviction that American Indians also needed to secure rights to their land; in fact, the ABCFM wrote that “The doctrine that Indians cannot be civilized ... is the ... slander of men who covet their lands” (qtd. in Haselby, 2015, p. 297).

of the colonizers (p. 112).⁶ The three chapters that follow this one highlight this agency as part of its decolonial approach. Tracing the agency of local populations as they engage with colonial language policy and literacy education allows us to imagine pluriversal perspectives and possibilities that may otherwise be buried.

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

The ABCFM was established in 1810 by graduates of Williams College (Massachusetts) and became one of the largest American Protestant missionary organizations in the 19th century. Prior to the establishment of the ABCFM, American missionary activities were mostly limited to proselytizing to Native peoples and some financial support of the British mission in India (Lindsay, 1965, p. 10). The ABCFM's first missionaries were sent to India in 1812; later, the field expanded to include North American Natives as well as stations as far afield as Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), China, Singapore, Thailand, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Persia, Liberia and Sierra Leone in Africa, and the Zulus in southern Africa. Following in the footsteps of the Wits, the ABCFM's founding documents reinscribe the nation-mission narrative, using it to justify the organization's existence (Haselby, 2015, p. 197).

The ABCFM grew to have an extremely powerful influence at home and abroad in the 19th century. As an institution, it was built and developed through strategic bureaucratization and consolidation of various missionary efforts (for example, it absorbed the United Foreign Missionary Society in 1825; see Haselby, 2015, p. 240). In 1820, 62 men and 48 women had been sent to eastern and western Asia, the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), and locations in the US with Native populations. The ABCFM founded 40 schools with 3,000 children and 300 boarding students enrolled. In spite of these efforts, the organization was not particularly effective in its proselytization mission, as it spent \$200,000 to ultimately convert 50 people (Lindsay, 1965, p. 21). Haselby (2015) noted that "by 1830, the ABCFM was spending \$100,000 a year, almost twice Harvard University's 1830 total annual income, to support a missionary force of 224 ordained ministers, 600 native teachers, and 50,000

6 Spack (2002) offered a definition of translanguaging that should be seen as an important precursor, with strong similarities, to Horner, Min-Zhan Lu et al.'s (2011) discussion of the concept. Her definition is as follows: "... here I use [translanguaging] to capture the translanguaging process students underwent as they moved back and forth between languages making qualitative decisions about which aspects of language to incorporate and which to reject or transform. Translanguaging involved not only students' language use and choices but also the transformation of their linguistic and cultural identities, for their worldview was now being mediated through a new language" (p. 112).

students” (p. 252). By 1860, according to the ABCFM’s report, the organization’s budget was approximately 8 million dollars; they claimed 415 ordained missionaries and 843 unordained missionaries located in 269 stations within 31 missions (Lindsay, 1965, p. 21). There were 458 local “helpers, preachers, and pastors”; 149 churches with 55,000 members; and 369 seminaries and schools with more than 10,000 children enrolled (Lindsay, 1965, p. 21).

Rufus Anderson is an important figure in the history of the ABCFM and of SPC because of his role leading the ABCFM’s overseas work from 1832 until 1866. During his tenure, Anderson narrowed the organization’s scope and mission to conversion from the broader “civilizing” mission that the ABCFM had previously assumed (Makdisi, 2011). Initially, the ABCFM allowed local converts to join the mission only if they professed the faith and were educated—this high standard was prohibitive for the expansion of foreign missions (Harris, 1999, p. 6). Anderson changed mission policy to focus primarily on conversion and believed that Christianity itself would do the work of “civilizing” converts (Harris, 1999, p. 7). Ideologically, Anderson was anti-imperialist and explicitly resisted any training that would produce missionaries who were “agents of imperialism” or “collaborators for Western commerce and diplomacy” (Harris, 1999, p. 99). Instead, Anderson strongly promoted a “three-self” doctrine for church creation, arguing that missionaries’ key responsibilities were to establish churches that would eventually become “self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating” (Stowe, 1998/n.d.). As a result, there was a great expansion of the ABCFM abroad under Anderson, but those educated by missions became dependent on them for employment (Harris, 1999, p. 99). The ultimate success of the “three-self” doctrine is questionable, particularly in the context of the Ottoman Empire and present-day Middle East, which saw few converts but led to many becoming interested in the education that Western missionaries could offer.

The ABCFM and the Ottoman Empire

As mentioned previously, the ABCFM was founded in 1810, and its first mission site was located in Bombay in 1812 (Masters, 2001).⁷ The ABCFM Syria Mission in the Ottoman Empire was established in Palestine in 1818. The

7 After 1870, all Presbyterian missionaries affiliated with the ABCFM moved to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (PBFM); at that time, the Syria Mission was also transferred to the PBFM (Global Ministries, 2023). The PBFM merged with other organizations in 1961; present-day organizations that trace their lineage to the ABCFM include the United Church Board for World Ministries (United Church of Christ, today Wider Church Ministries), the Division of Overseas Ministries (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ), and Global Ministries.

Beirut site was established in 1823 and grew to become the most important, and permanent, site in the region for the ABCFM⁸ (the Palestine mission closed in 1844⁹). The ABCFM was not, however, the first missionary program in the Ottoman Empire. The Society of Jesus, or the French Jesuits, founded a mission in Syria in 1626, and it continued until 1773, when Rome ordered it closed (Thompson, 2002). During this time, the Jesuits “converted many Orthodox Christians to Catholicism, guided the reorganization of the Maronite Church, and established two seminaries in Mount Lebanon” (p. 73).

American Protestants entered the Near East for several reasons. First, the region was outside of British control. Therefore, the field was untainted by British colonialism and potential converts did not have this association with the missionaries. Additionally the mission did not have to negotiate with America’s settler colonial ambitions; as Makdisi (2011) put it, missionaries in the Ottoman Empire “could simply bask in American glory one crucial step removed from its inglorious underpinnings” (p. 176). There was also a high degree of literacy among the population compared to other parts of the world—from the perspective of the missionaries, the region was more civilized and developed than other foreign posts.¹⁰ What’s more, Syria proved to be an ideal location for its proximity to the West and for the hospitable living environment it provided to the missionaries. According to a late-19th-century retrospective history of the Syria Mission published by the ABCFM:

... it is interesting to see how Providence directed the pioneers of the mission to locate it in just that point where the Arabic-speaking portion of our race has attained the highest degree of development, where the body has drunk in vigor

8 According to Masters (2001), American and British missions targeted the Middle East under the auspices of converting “the Jews of the Holy Land” and began their work in Jerusalem for this reason (p. 147). However, Ottoman Jews proved difficult to convert and “faced with indifference or open hostility ... the Americans moved their operations to Beirut in 1823 where they began to proselytize among the local Christians,” such as the Greek Orthodox and Maronites, who were considered “nominal Christians” (Masters, 2001, p. 147).

9 The Palestine mission eventually closed due to sickness, “lack of faithful native assistants,” and less desire for education than in Beirut (Lindsay, 1965, p. 109); the Cyprus mission opened in 1839 but closed in 1842 (Laurie, 1862). A separate mission in Turkey was established after Syria and included the northern part of Syria, previously part of the Syria mission.

10 However, the degree of “civility” was relative only to other parts of the world—it was understood that non-Anglo cultures and non-Protestant religions were inherently inferior: the missionaries “discoursed on the national matters, customs, and traits of the Syrians, Turks, Armenians, and Arabs, sometimes sympathetically and sometimes not, but always with the knowledge that theirs was not simply the more righteous civilization but also the most powerful” (Makdisi, 2011, p. 177).

from the cool springs and bracing air of goodly Lebanon, and the mind has learned manliness under the inspiration of the freedom long maintained in those mountain fastnesses, after it had been swept away from more accessible regions by the merciless oppression of the Turk. Here, too, in this home of energetic and thinking men, is the commercial center of Syria, offering every facility for the diffusion of truth; while constant communication with Europe rouses inquiring minds to search into the causes of the prosperity of nations so much more favored than themselves, and the healthy atmosphere of Lebanon offers itself to sustain the vigor of missionaries sent there from a northern clime. (Laurie, 1862, pp. 3–4)

Moreover, the region held a historical, religious affinity for Christians as the holy land. There were already many Christians (such as Maronites and Greek Orthodox) in the region, though they were considered “nominal.”¹¹ Jews and Muslims already accepted the Old Testament, providing a potential foothold for conversion, and the Druze population initially seemed open to conversion (though later this proved not to be the case).¹² These first American missionaries did not expect to be able to easily convert Muslims; however, they believed an indirect approach, through schools, books, and scriptures, could eventually influence them.¹³

According to Samir Khalaf (2002), the mission in Syria “came to occupy a special place in the hopes and aspirations of New England missionaries their inroads into Lebanon turned out to be the most seminal and far-reaching in terms of the socio-cultural transformations they generated in the lives of the people they touched” (pp. 16–17).¹⁴ Because of the unstable

11 In a historical retrospective of the ABCFM’s Syria Mission, the Reverend Thomas Laurie wrote in 1862: “Good people in America are often at a loss to understand how there can be so many Christian sects in Syria, and no religion” (p. 8).

12 The Druze expressed interest in mass conversion to Protestantism primarily to be protected from being drafted into the Egyptian military when Egypt occupied Syria (c. 1831–1840) (Masters, 2001, p. 152).

13 They also hoped for the collapse of the Empire, which would remove the legal restrictions that prevented the mission from proselytizing directly to the Muslim population (Lindsay, 1965).

14 There were a variety of responses within the Ottoman Empire and Syria to the presence of Protestant missionaries. According to Khalaf (2002), the secular elements of Northeastern Puritanism were received well from the beginning: “... it was the diffusion of such practical precepts—those of temperance, moderation, sobriety, frugality, industry, silence, cleanliness—that was less obtrusive and hence more penetrating in its impact” (p. 43). Syrian Muslims held a variety of attitudes about non-Muslim schools in the region, some of which are discussed further in Chapter 4: While more conservative Muslims rejected the presence of Mus-

geopolitical landscape in the Ottoman Empire at the time, missionaries in the Levant continually adapted their approaches to evangelism in ways that were distinct within the global mission field.¹⁵ Indeed, Makdisi (2011) noted that as they negotiated their work in relation to the broader regional context, missionaries ultimately “abandoned [the] millennial enthusiasm [of the early nineteenth-century evangelists] for the much harder task of accommodating themselves to foreign realities” (p. 217). While they generally failed to convert the masses, American missionaries continued to enjoy support within the region in part because they provided education and modern medicine (Murre-van den Berg, 2007, pp. 15–16).¹⁶

By the time the Jesuits returned to Syria in 1831, Protestant missionaries dominated the field, and the ABCFM had already established a printing press and schools (Roper, 1999; Tejirian & Simon, 2002).¹⁷ The two groups often saw themselves in competition with each other throughout the 19th century. This battle for conversions manifested itself in the continued growth of schools and printing presses throughout the region. The French Jesuit Université Saint-Joseph (USJ), for example, opened in Beirut in 1875 and is often seen as the Jesuit missionaries’ response to the opening of SPC less than a decade earlier.¹⁸ In the first decade of the 20th century, nearly half of the

lims in non-Muslim schools, others welcomed the introduction of modern sciences through Christian education (Haddad, 2002, p. 257). Proponents of this view warned Muslims who entered Christian schools not to be affected by the Christian indoctrination they were sure to be exposed to. Others, such as Arab Ottoman nationalists, held that secular education was against the community’s distinct religious and national identity. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid in the late-19th century, as noted previously, the Ottoman government established state-funded schools in major cities. Some Muslims also established schools “in Beirut, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Damascus, and Baghdad to provide a modern education for their sons that would equal that on offer in the missionary schools” (Masters, 2013, p. 196).

15 For example, Syria was the site of Egyptian and Ottoman conflicts in the first half of the 19th century, and American missionaries had to leave Beirut temporarily when Britain attacked in 1840 to force Egypt out (Harris, 1999, p. 102).

16 American missionaries were extremely limited in their success, in part because communities would shun those who converted—the threat of social isolation was high, with dangerous implications for the converttee (Masters, 2001, pp. 148–49).

17 In the Ottoman Empire, the ABCFM Press helped produce texts for the mission as well as local schools in the native language (Lindsay, 1965, p. 60). The American Mission Press was established in 1822 in Malta and moved to Beirut in 1832 (Lindner, 2013). The Press, which in Malta collaborated with the English Church Missionary Society’s press, initially published in Greek and Italian, and later in Arabic (Roper, 1999).

18 USJ is an important site for post-secondary literacy education in Syria, and its curriculum was similar to SPC’s in its offering of “modern” subjects such as history, geography, math, and sciences alongside languages and rhetoric. If I had 10 more years to develop French-language skills (of which I currently have none) and to conduct archival research, I would love to con-

Syrian immigrants who arrived in the United States were literate, and many had been educated in Protestant schools (Masters, 2001, p. 151).¹⁹

Common schools were the first American schools established in the region—these were elementary, teaching basic literacy (Lindsay, 1965). The earliest American school was established in 1824 in Beirut, which had become the center of American missionary activities, and educated the children of local people employed by missionaries as well as neighborhood children. By 1825, the school enrolled 80–90 students, the majority of whom came from Greek Orthodox families. A second school was established a few miles away from Beirut in 1825 and enrolled 20 boys (Lindsay, 1965). Generally speaking, at the beginning of this period, the educational approach of the ABCFM in Syria was conservative, focusing on memorization and recitation of scripture and religious texts. Literacy was viewed as an important way of spreading Protestant Christianity (p. 60).

Between 1830 and 1860, missionary presence in the Ottoman Empire brought in many changes, but the most widespread was the establishment of mission common schools in the region (Makdisi, 2000). By 1835, 11 schools had been established by the ABCFM in Syria, enrolling 323 students including 75 girls (Lindsay, 1965). Between 1845–1860, the policy of the ABCFM under Rufus Anderson led to an effort to make schools more religious. By 1862, local schools enrolled 1,925 students. For the remainder of the 19th century, enrollment in missionary common schools in Syria increased dramatically—perhaps because Rufus Anderson was no longer at the helm of the ABCFM’s overseas work. According to Lindsay (1965), there were 2,840 students enrolled in 1876; 5,180 in 1884; and 6,087 in 1891. Missionary Henry Harris Jessup, however, reported that in 1897, enrollment was closer to 17,000 (including 8,000 girls) in all the Protestant schools in Syria and Palestine, with 150 American schools in Syria (Makdisi, 2011, p. 168).²⁰

sider USJ’s curriculum alongside SPC’s. However, I have not mentioned USJ extensively in this book as it remains outside the purview of my current expertise. A few relevant sources include Adil Baktiaya (2008), Susanna Ferguson (2018), Julia Hauser, Christine Lindner, and Esther Möller (2016), Rafaël Herzstein (2007, 2008, 2020, 2024), Idir Ouahes (2017), and Lorella Ventura (2014, 2018). I invite others to pursue this research!

19 Signs of the battle between Protestants and Jesuits in their pursuit of converts remain in present-day Lebanon in well-respected American-style and French educational institutions, as well as churches, which are prioritized and patronized by many elite and middle-class Lebanese families.

20 There is some discrepancy here, with Jessup’s account likely being somewhat exaggerated in his memoir, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria* (1910). Whatever the case, the larger point—that enrollment was increasing significantly around the turn of the 20th century—stands.

While schools initially tried to provide religious education only, the local community wanted a modern, secular education. This affected the structure and focus of missionary schools (Makdisi, 2000, p. 90). In the beginning, the majority of the students who attended mission schools were from Christian sects, but this changed in the latter half of the 19th century (Masters, 2013, p. 195). By the first decades of the 20th century, American missions had broadened their approach to education significantly: "... by the eve of World War I the American schools were designed with the hope that they would help civilize, elevate, and enlighten the people of the Levant not only through religious instruction but also through a broad curriculum designed to create independent thinking and a broad spectrum of enlightening knowledge" (Lindsay, 1965, p. 112).

In addition to the common schools, which provided a relatively temporary basic education, the ABCFM also invested in opening several boarding schools, which were more costly and provided long-term education. In Lebanon, these schools included the Beirut Boys School (1835–1842), Abeih Seminary (c. 1844–1875), and others in Sidon (Sidon Evangelical School for Girls, est. 1862; Sidon Academy/Gerard Institute, est. 1881 and today merged as the National Evangelical Institute for Girls and Boys), Souk el Gharb (1882), and Zahleh (1885–1886) (Lindsay, 1965). The curriculum at these schools included a larger variety of subjects than those offered at the common schools. Like the missions' boarding schools for Native people in America, these schools were meant to separate students from their families and enculturate them in Protestant values and beliefs. Missionaries believed that these schools

would diffuse Christian knowledge more widely A boarding school could train translators, native preachers, teachers, and assistants for the mission as well as offer men for public service who could later exercise an enlightened influence in the government. By providing well-trained young men for the government, the prestige of the ABCFM would be enhanced. (Lindsay, 1965, p. 141)

The language of instruction also proved important to mission schools. Prior to Rufus Anderson's tenure at the ABCFM, English was the medium of instruction at most schools because this allowed students to read religious texts as well as be exposed to Western knowledge (Lindsay, 1965, p. 145). When Anderson became the ABCFM's secretary, the language of instruction at the ABCFM schools changed to Arabic only, with education focused primarily on the Arabic language, math, and geography. Western knowledge was

thought to have a corrupting influence, and it was feared it would encourage students to leave their home country (p. 155). In spite of the ABCFM's official policy, however, the Abieh Seminary succumbed to the demands of parents and local stakeholders and offered training in history, astronomy, natural philosophy, and English. Later, after SPC was founded, these secondary schools served unofficially as preparatory schools for the college.

The ABCFM and the Founding of Syrian Protestant College

In 1860, in large part due to the U.S. Civil War, the ABCFM was insolvent; financial support had been reduced dramatically for education and the Syrian mission in particular (Lindsay, 1965). At the same time, thousands of people migrated to Beirut due to conflicts between the Druze and Christians in Mount Lebanon, with European powers intervening and taking sides (the Druze were supported by the British whereas the Christians were supported by the French). Traditional familial, tribal, and religious hierarchies were broken and new economic structures requiring new skills and knowledge emerged. These developments, in combination with increasing contact with the West, led to an increased demand for modern education in Syria, especially in metropolitan areas such as Beirut. The Jesuits had also increased their activity in Beirut, which in turn amplified pressure for the American Protestant mission to respond. The French schools were growing rapidly, while the Protestants' stagnated, presumably because they did not provide exposure to the Western languages and culture demanded by the local population.

As enrollment in ABCFM's schools decreased in the early 1860s, the missionaries began to consider the possibility of establishing a college.²¹ The missionaries reported to the ABCFM that, from their vantage point, "a more just appreciation of the value of education is rapidly spreading through the

21 The Syrian Society of Arts and Sciences (1847–1852, الجمعية السورية للعلوم و الفنون), founded by missionaries Eli Smith and Cornelius Van Dyck as well as native Syrians Butrus al-Bustani and Nasif al-Yaziji, is a good example of the intellectual work that preceded and, in part, motivated the founding of SPC (American University of Beirut Libraries, 2025, *al-Nabda*). Smith is credited for bringing the first Arabic printing press to Syria and beginning the first Protestant translation of the Bible in Arabic; Van Dyck was one of the founders of and a medical professor at SPC; al-Bustani was a Protestant convert who taught for the Syrian mission; and al-Yaziji later became a teacher at SPC. Smith and al-Bustani began the work of translating the Bible into Arabic, a project that Van Dyck and al-Yaziji continued to fruition; it was published in 1865. This Protestant translation of the Bible into Arabic was the most popular version of the Arabic Bible until the late 20th century. Van Dyck learned Arabic from al-Bustani and al-Yaziji, and he wrote many math and science textbooks in Arabic which were used in Syrian schools. al-Bustani is considered one of the major writers of the Arab *al-Nabda* (النهضة), or the Renaissance) movement.

Arab community generally” (Salibi & Khoury, 1995, p. 57).²² In response to the Syrian mission’s request for the project’s approval, the ABCFM worried that offering the local population a more expansive education would risk alienating the students from their home communities, writing that “it is difficult to educate without, to a certain extent, denationalizing” (as cited in Jessup, 1910/2002, p. 301). The ABCFM offered their endorsement—but not official support—of the college only if the missionaries continued “emphasizing the vernacular part of the educational course” (as cited in Jessup, 1910/2002, p. 301). Therefore, SPC was officially founded separately from the ABCFM, but the college remained closely aligned with the ABCFM. The first faculty and administrators, including Daniel Bliss, George Post, and Cornelius Van Dyck, were in Syria as ABCFM missionaries prior to becoming faculty and administrators of the college, and the college’s Board of Managers included missionaries living in Syria.

The original goal of the college, like the ABCFM’s goal for its mission churches, was to create an institution that would eventually be locally run and self-supporting: Daniel Bliss (1920/1989), SPC’s first president, wrote in a retrospective account toward the end of his life that the college was founded with the assumption that

... the native Arab element should be introduced as fast as possible into the professorships and other teaching positions, in all departments of the College, in order that the Syrians might have every facility for qualifying themselves to assume, at no distant day, the entire management of the institution; that care should be exercised to prevent the students from becoming denationalized; that, in the interests of the independence and self-respect of the student body, the principle of self-support should be fostered as far as possible. (p. 68)

For this reason, Arabic was the medium of instruction for nearly two decades after the college was established (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the college’s decision to change the language of instruction to English). Although the decision about the language of instruction aligned with the conservative

22 The establishment and ultimate long-term success of institutions such as SPC and Université Saint-Joseph (the French Jesuit university opened in 1875) substantiates the missionaries’ claims. However, it is likely that these claims were exaggerated. Alternative explanations could be that the establishment of the schools by French and American missionaries spurred a growing interest in education in the region, or, as Fortna (2002) pointed out, the value of education and enlightenment ideals was growing throughout the Empire simultaneous to the development of mission schools.

principles held by the ABCFM since the 1840s, the curriculum was modern, similar to that of the American colleges where the founders had been educated.²³ Writing, rhetoric, and literature were taught in Arabic, English, and French (with a focus on translation and conversation in English and French). Greek and Latin were electives, and Turkish was introduced in the third year. Mental and moral philosophy, mathematics, and science were part of the literary curriculum; the medical department included courses in anatomy, chemistry, physiology, medicine, and surgery.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the complex sociopolitical conditions in which SPC was founded in 1866 and forecasts the significance of SPC as a site of analysis for the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies. In the second half of the 19th century, Syrians were the subjects of a vast empire, the Ottoman Empire, with a language and culture distinct from the government's. This led to conflict and demands for autonomy that, at least in Beirut, were eventually granted. Compared to the rest of the region, Western influence was strongest in Syria because of its religious diversity, which included several Christian denominations. Education was largely private in the Empire until the turn of the 20th century, but there was a shared belief, especially among the rising middle class, that education could facilitate progress and prosperity. Most subjects of the Ottoman Empire were tied by a shared religious identity and saw the Empire as a ruling power that was preferable to Western imperialism.

Beginning in the 18th century, language and writing—including the fixing or standardization of language—became tied to the modern nation-state, with global colonialism underwriting this change. In the young United States, writing was used, alongside violence, to take land from Indigenous peoples, to map out a “newly discovered” country, and to trade humans as property. American Protestant missionaries held mixed views of the settler colonialism that pervaded their home country. But no matter their ambivalence, colonial epistemology informed a rewriting of history, ultimately producing a rhetoric of American exceptionalism—a belief that America was a nation chosen by God—that justified a missions movement that reached far beyond U.S. borders to “civilize” and convert the “lost.”

The American missionaries who settled in the region in the early 19th century were indistinguishable from the British to most locals. The ABCFM

23 Daniel Bliss, SPC's first president, was educated at Amherst College, graduating in 1852, and Andover Theological Seminary, graduating in 1855.

targeted the Ottoman Empire for missionary work because it was outside of British control, the people had high rates of literacy, and so-called “nominal” Christians could be targeted for conversion. The ABCFM was an important sponsor of modern (Western) education, literacy, and the press to the region.

Haselby (2015) called the founding of SPC “the greatest achievement of the American missions movement,” in large part because its founding put religion in a backseat position to the nationalism that was fundamental to the American Protestant evangelical movement (p. 244). Indeed, as Haselby (2015) pointed out, SPC—and later, AUB—“has never taught theology, nor had a seminary, nor even a religious studies department” (p. 244). Instead, its focus from the beginning was on providing a solidly Western education to the region, through which American (Christian) nationalism could be transmitted by virtue of its Protestant founders and Western (mostly American) professoriate. Indeed, as the first institution of higher education like it in the region, SPC represented for the local population, as well as the college faculty, an unofficial but important extension of an otherwise distant America. The success of SPC—and later, AUB—can be credited, at least in part, to the college’s success in persuading the local population that its aim was not to force conversions through religious indoctrination. Rather, the college succeeded in presenting the knowledge it transmitted as universal and universally valuable—a hallmark of colonial epistemology.

But how did the college succeed in promoting its universal value in the context of the Ottoman Empire? To answer this question, we must consider that the Empire itself was undergoing a great deal of change, both in terms of updating its approach to education to become more “modern” (Western), and in interacting with—even relying on—European powers in order to survive. Exposure to Western innovations and epistemologies, therefore, would have primed the regional population to be open to Western schools. Undoubtedly, too, the college’s location in Beirut was advantageous. Arab subjects had historically experienced conflict with each other and with the Empire; they saw themselves, and were seen by others, as distinct from Ottoman Turks. Relatively recently, they had begun to realize their autonomy as the Empire’s grip over the region weakened. And, although the majority viewed themselves as Arab, the local population was highly diverse, including the “nominal” Christians that American Protestants had worked with frequently and with whom they occasionally had success. These experiences of precarity and independence, as well as regular encounters with difference, may have made some parts of the population more open to the education on offer by SPC.

As the rest of this book attests, SPC operated as a space where the Ottoman political sphere, the Arab world, and the American Protestant missionary

movement converged. At SPC, language, culture, and identity were continually in flux and up for negotiation. SPC invited students to convert—or “come over”—to American Protestant culture and epistemology through its education. A decolonial analysis of the curriculum, student protests, and student writing at SPC—which comprises the coming chapters—offers scholars a more nuanced understanding of how literacy and rhetoric propelled SPC students’ co-construction of identity in relation to the imagined America offered in and through the institution. Negotiation of the struggle over who *did* or *could* belong in this imagined America—and how literacy education is key to understanding this struggle—is the focus of this book.

In the upcoming chapters, I show how an imagined America—including the colonial epistemology underlying it—was always at the center of the college’s approach toward literacy education. This centering of colonial epistemology, I argue, shaped not only how the college educated its students in and through literacy, but also how its students identified themselves rhetorically in relation to it. Analyzing SPC as a site of *colonial* literacy education—perhaps especially because it operated outside the formal processes of colonization—is valuable because it exposes the processes by which colonial epistemology has been, and continues to be, transmitted and sustained through literacy education. This analysis should also prompt scholars in rhetoric and writing studies to more purposefully examine the field’s disciplinary history—as well as its disciplinary present and future—through a decolonial lens. The forthcoming chapters show, through analysis of several specific moments in the history of SPC, how colonialism has shaped (and continues to shape) approaches to literacy education, as well as how approaches to literacy education have shaped (and continue to shape) students.