

“BUT WHAT SAYEST THOU?”

*A Bazaar conversation
Christian missions discussed*

FOREWORD

The following dialogue seeks to give briefly the attitude of the average Moslem and Copt towards Christian missions and their activities. The compiler has put into their mouths statements that he has heard frequently in the course of mission life in Egypt.

The scene is the shop of a Coptic Christian in the busy thoroughfare of an Egyptian provincial town. He is standing at the door of his shop in conversation with a Moslem, a minor official of the local government offices. A missionary and his companion, an Egyptian evangelist, are passing and are invited by the shopkeeper, to whom they are known, to join them.

"But What Sayest Thou?"

By Archibald M. Hay, M.A.

Moslem: "I am glad to meet you, for I have often, wanted to meet a missionary, especially after what the Arabic press said recently about you and your work. I fear some scurrilous things were said, but frankly I never believed them. We have had missionaries living in our town for the last 30 years or more, and friends of mine who have known some of them intimately told me that there was not a word of truth in the accusations which the newspapers brought against them.

Missionary: "Thank you, it is kind of you to say so. The newspaper campaign certainly was bitter, but it did not really affect us in districts where we were known. It did harm, though, in creating a bitter spirit amongst the ignorant and illiterate masses. And it was all the more reprehensible in that the newspaper folk had had ample opportunity of knowing better, after more than half a century of missionary activity by different missions in Egypt. It would have been ridiculous, had it not been criminal, to bring such absurd charges against the missions as kidnapping, napping, hypnotism and moral corruption. "

Moslem: "Still, it is your missionary activity, as you call it, that we do not want in Egypt. After all, we are a Moslem country, and Islam has superseded Christianity, besides being superior to it in every way."

Missionary: "This is not the occasion to argue about your last statement, but our missionary activity, to which you object, is both justifiable and beneficial. Look, for instance, at the fine mission schools, especially those in Ismailia, Suez, and elsewhere. A number of your well-to-do Moslem countrymen have sent their children, both boys and girls to these schools, which have set a high standard both of education and of character training. And everybody recognises the altruistic motive that lies behind these institutions. They have not been run for profit, but because the missionaries believe that in Christian teaching they have a gift to pass on to Egypt. "

Moslem: "Yes, I admit a good deal of what you say about mission schools and colleges. I know Moslems do send their children to them because of the character training which is given. But, as a strict Moslem, I object to Christian teaching in them being compulsory. The Government should not allow it."

Missionary: "But it is this very Christian teaching to which you object that is the foundation of the character, which they desire for their children. Consider, too, mission hospitals. They are as efficient as government hospitals, and undoubtedly the patients experience in them a greater measure of care and kindness. Why the hospital at Shebeen el Kanater is known and loved in all the villages for miles around."

Moslem: "Yes, I have had friends who have been treated at that hospital and they could never speak too highly of the love and attention bestowed upon them there. In fact, it prejudiced them, as it has done scores of others, in favour of Christianity, and I believe that to this day they even read the Gospel and Christian magazines. That is what I object to about your work in hospitals. It does not matter so much for the educated who can judge for themselves, but you get ignorant, simple folk into them and by your kindness blind them to the blasphemy of your Christian teaching, that Christ was God's Son and that he, a Prophet of God, was crucified. "

Missionary: "Pardon me, but that is very strong language and I beg you to believe that it is quite unjustifiable. I am sure that you would not speak of Christianity in such terms if you had studied its teaching for yourself. Have you by any chance read the Gospel?"

Moslem: "No, I have not, but I have heard our sheikhs discussing it, and they know. They all say that you Christians and Jews have corrupted the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."

Missionary: "I am surprised that an educated man, such as you are, takes things at second hand without inquiring for yourself. Not a day passes but what we hear this charge from every class of Moslem society, that the Gospel is corrupted. Yet no one is ever able to furnish any proof of that, other than its divergence in certain particulars from the Koran. I am glad to tell you that there is a growing number of open-minded people who are inquiring into Christianity for themselves and are reading the Gospel. "

Moslem: "Well, I know this that in spite of the large numbers of missionaries, American and British, in the country, and in spite of the numbers of years of your 'activity', the number of converts is practically nil. There is only a handful of foolish, deluded girls, and some men who have apostasised from Islam in order to better their position. Tell me, frankly, how much do you give each convert for becoming a Christian, and is it true that your government gives you £100 for each case won?"

Missionary (laughing): "Oh, so you have heard that story, have you! The truth is that we neither give anything nor receive anything. I do not think that you and your friends rightly understand what it is to become a Christian. It is first an inner change of heart and life, and converts are only accepted after a period of probation, in which they have clearly shown

that that change has taken place. Then only are they permitted publicly to confess themselves Christian."

Moslem: "Whatever sort of change it is, the government should not allow it. No Moslem should be allowed to apostasise and change his religion."

Missionary: "But your constitution, as a modern state after the democratic fashion of Europe, provides for religious freedom amongst other rights. Surely it is permissible for anyone to change their religion according to the dictates of conscience."

Moslem: "I know there is such a clause in our constitution concerning religious freedom. But you do not understand the position. As I have already said, this is, a Moslem state, and the religious law of Islam, the Sharia, is paramount. The constitutional law has to be interpreted in the light of that religious law. We have religious freedom in Egypt, but it is freedom for the Christian to remain a Christian, and others to remain what they are. Strictly speaking, it is not freedom to proselytise; least of all is it freedom for Moslems to become Christians."

Missionary: "That seems a strange conception of religious freedom, and it is open to criticism in two ways. Firstly, in certain cases the religious law of Islam does not obtain, but is set aside by the constitutional law. For instance, in cases of theft and adultery the religious law orders respectively the amputation of the hand and the immuring of the guilty woman until death. But neither of these punishments is to-day carried out in Egypt. Secondly, every year a number of Copts turn Moslem (their motive in so doing we need not examine). But if it is permitted for Copts to become Moslems, why not for Moslems to become Christians?"

Moslem: "No, no. That is unheard of. The Koran enjoins the punishment of death upon apostasy. You must remember that in spite of our modern constitution Egypt is a Moslem state. For that reason legal procedure exists only for Copts to become Moslems; there is none whereby Moslems can become Christians. The apostate outlaws himself or herself in a Moslem state. Before the law they have ceased to have any status or rights."

Missionary: "What you say makes it all the more remarkable to me that the small group of converts, men and women, have had the courage at all to confess Christ. I have always felt that only a very real experience could carry them through not only these legal difficulties which you have just mentioned, but also the persecutions and hardships which they encounter from a hostile public opinion."

Moslem: "Your mention of women converts reminds me of another aspect of this subject, to which we Moslems take grave exception. Women and girls should never be allowed to become Christians. They are generally ignorant, foolish, and weak, and thus easily become the victims of missionary deception, and such practices as hypnotism. I am glad to see that the religious courts have recently taken a strong line and are enforcing the religious law. They rightly insist upon the exercise of guardianship by their nearest Moslem relatives where guardianship and girls are concerned. As long as a woman is marriageable at all, she

should be strictly under her guardians according to our law. I am not at all happy either about the freedom granted in some of our better class Moslem families, and who knows what will be the final result of so much education of women and girls!"

Copt: "I am an Egyptian, as you are, but I confess that I welcome education, alike for our boys and girls. If we want to hold our own in the world to-day and to count as a modern country, we must have western education. And it is not much use educating our boys if we do not educate the girls as well, for it is the mothers who are the foundation of family life. As long as they remain ignorant, and cling to old superstitions and customs, we shall make little progress."

Moslem: "Yes, I have been very pleased with my own daughters' education in Cairo. I hope they will be able to, make good marriages with some well-educated government official. But of course I exercise strict control over them. To return, however, to the subject which we were discussing, of missionary activity, I am pleased with you Copts. You too are Christians, but you keep your religion to yourselves and do not try to pervert Moslems from the true faith. If only you missionaries would do the same, we should be happy. We are grateful for your schools and hospitals and admire your personal characters, but you should be content to live your religion instead of teaching and preaching it in our villages, and scattering your Christian literature everywhere."

Missionary: "I am afraid that you fail to realise that the qualities which you kindly praise in our mission work, or in the character of missionaries, owe their very existence to the Gospel and to the Person to whom it witnesses. Quite apart from His command to us in the Gospel to teach and preach, it would be impossible for us to keep silent concerning the source of our life and its activity."

Moslem: "Well, I hold strongly to my opinion, that even though what has been accomplished by your activity in all these years is comparatively negligible, and though you will never make any effect on Islam, still Egypt is a Moslem country, and it is the duty of our government to protect its inhabitants from foreign interference, whatever form it takes." (He rises to take his leave).

Missionary: "Before you leave may I ask your acceptance of this copy of the Gospel. It is my own personal copy, but its message has meant so much to my own life that I should be delighted to give it you, if you would accept and read it." (The Moslem, surprised and pleased, accepts with a little embarrassment and departs thoughtfully).

Copt: "I fear me you have thrown away your well bound book. He will never read it, and if he did, it would make no difference to him. No Moslem can ever be really converted."

Missionary: "I am glad to say that I do not share your fear. I recall immediately the case of one Moslem who for ten years had by him a copy of John's gospel. Several times he picked it up to read, only to throw it down in anger. But ultimately he humbled himself to receive its message, and to-day, after confession by baptism is living a strong, consistent Christian life, and there are many similar cases."

Copt: "All the same, our Moslem friend hit the nail on the head in my opinion, when he said that the result of your many years' activity was negligible. I think you missionaries are just wasting your time."

Missionary: "I admit that there is not yet much to show, but we have the first fruits of a large harvest to come. And even in the absence of these we still have our Lord's command in the Gospel to preach and make disciples. "

Copt: "Yes, I know there is that command. But tell me, how many supposed converts are there in all Egypt?"

Missionary: "The exact number is uncertain. Shall we say between two and three hundred."

Copt: "Well, believe me, there is not one of those who has become a Christian except for motive of material gain."

Missionary: "That is very sweeping. Do you personally know any Moslem convert? You do not, and do not want to!! Well you can take it from me, who know many of them personally, that not one of those dear men or women of God gained, anything but hardship, affliction, persecution, and even peril when they became Christians. And, if in some cases they have gone back into Islam, it has not infrequently been due to the lack of sympathy and the suspicion which they encountered from so-called Christians. Why, I know of one Moslem convert, whom a Coptic priest would not receive, from fear of the trouble which might come upon his church from the Moslem villagers."

Copt: "It is all very well for you a foreigner. Your government protects you, and the Moslems dare not touch you. But with us it is different. They persecute us to-day as they have done for the last 1200 years, only in more refined ways. They keep us out of the best posts, even when we are more than qualified for them, and where possible put extra work unjustly upon us. Why, even in government schools Moslem boys will object to small being taught by a Coptic teacher, and will bully a boy for no other reason than that he is a Copt. We have learned through bitter experience that our wisest course is to keep quietly to ourselves."

Missionary: "I have no intention of being hard upon you, for I have read with sympathy of all that your church has endured in the past, and instances of present day persecution, such as you mention, have come to my own notice.

Copt: "Yes, we are proud of our church, and that is why we cling loyally to it with its mass, its fasts and its noble saints. And pardon me if I add that in this matter we have something of a quarrel with you Protestant missionaries. You come to our towns and preach your 'Gospel', and entice some of our people away from their loyalty to their national Church. Preach to Moslems, if you must, but leave us Copts alone. Else I am afraid you will justly earn the title of 'sheepstealers', which I have heard some of our priests use about you."

Missionary: "I am sorry that you regard us in that light, but the truth is that we are in somewhat of a predicament. For instance, your folk come to our hospitals and dispensaries and even expect preferential treatment as Christians, and send their children to our schools, and are we to be blamed because coming they hear the Gospel in these places? Nor can we very well tell Coptic friends that they are not to come to our Christian services. If they like to do so they are welcome. And I think that you will yourself admit that in most of your village churches there is little or no spiritual life. And naturally people will come where they get the help they need. I fear, too, that often what concerns your priests in losing members of their flock is that each loss represents a lower income for the priest himself."

Copt: "I admit that the financial affairs of our church, even in high places, are by no means what they should be. But we are trying to remedy that, and remember we have now the 'Friends of the Bible' Society, which is getting our young people to study the Bible for themselves. I hope too that the result may be to check Copts from becoming Moslems, a practice to which you referred when talking to our Moslem friend."

Missionary: "Yes, I know of the 'Friends of the Bible' and pray God to bless the movement, for nothing but good can come from going back to the source of our faith, the Gospel."

Evangelist: "I am an Egyptian, and as you know, a member of the Evangelical church and work as an evangelist in it. I shared at one time your disbelief in the sincerity of Moslem converts, and your fear of Moslems in general. But for several years now it has been my greatest joy to bring the Gospel message to our Moslem fellow countrymen. It came about in this way. I saw clearly that we were responsible to tell them the message which means so much to us, and then as I began to do so, rather timidly at first but in obedience to God, I found that He was taking away my fear and giving me love for them instead."

Copt: "Yes, I suppose in a way, as their fellow countrymen, we are responsible to tell them about the Gospel. But I think our responsibility is at an end now after all these years. If they will not listen, that is their fault. We have our churches and our services. If they want to know they can come to these and ask us. The truth is that they do not want our message."

Evangelist: "Yes, I know how they oppose and argue and ridicule, and I know that as yet we have not seen much fruit for our labour, still it is a continual source of amazement to myself the way in which God unceasingly shall renew faith and hope that we shall one day see a big harvest of Moslem souls."

Copt: "Well, I am afraid that I do not share your hope."

Evangelist: "Why, I could tell you already of a number with whom I have had close personal contact; in different classes of society, who have been convicted by reading God's Word, and who in their secret hearts believe that the Gospel message is the truth."

Copt: "It may be as you say. I only wish that I could believe it."

The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a customer.

The missionary and evangelist take their leave and walk away together.

Missionary: "I was most interested to hear what you said about God's deliverance from fear of Moslems. What a pity that the Evangelical Church as a whole has not sought and received this deliverance."

Evangelist: "Yes, I fear they have not yet faced this task of evangelising Moslems. If only they did in the strength and courage of the Holy Ghost, what a power they would be in the land. But at present most of the pastors, with some notable exceptions, seem entirely occupied in ministering to the needs of their usually small Christian congregations. If only they were set on fire, they could reach some of the hundreds of villages we never get to."

Missionary: "Still, we must thank God for the high standard of Christian living which they set in this Moslem land, and after all it is their congregations which supply largely the Christian workers in our schools and hospitals. Here we are at my house. Will you not come in and let us have some prayer together."

They enter the missionary's study, and for the next hour on their knees pour out their hearts in earnest supplication for the Lord's victory in Egypt, for the salvation of Moslem souls, and the revival of Coptic and Evangelical Churches.

EGYPT GENERAL MISSION.

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