Has The Near East College New Opportunities?

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Reprinted by

INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

İzmir (Smyrna) Turkey

From the MOSLEM WORLD, October, 1931

156 Fifth Avenue

New York, N. Y.

HAS THE NEAR EAST CHRISTIAN COLLEGE NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

In 1820 the first representatives in the Near East of the modern Protestant missionary movement arrived in Smyrna, which the new Turkish republic calls "Izmir," as it similarly says for Constantinople "Istanbul," and for Angora "Ankara." They found the Near East as it had been for hundreds of years, a medley of races, religions, languages and customs, though the old Ottoman Empire then covered, with the exception of Persia, nearly all the lands we now associate with the somewhat loosely defined term "Near East." These first missionaries, Levi Parsons and Pliny Fisk, and their immediate successors were given, by a wise and far-seeing governing Board at home, very broad instructions. "They were to survey not only the Holy Land, but the surrounding countries and then to put to themselves two main questions, 'What good can be done?' and 'By what means?' " [1]

Various circumstances in most of the Near East have prevented that duplication of effort by competing Boards, and that perpetuating of petty western denominational rivalries and distinctions which has been so unfortunate a factor in some other missionary areas. But throughout the region, in the century and a decade since the first workers arrived, several large Boards, such as the American Board (Congregational) in Turkey and the Balkans; the Presbyterian Board (North) in Syria and Persia; the United Presbyterian Board in Egypt; the British Church Missionary Society in Egypt, Palestine and Persia; the Dutch Reformed Church in Arabia and many smaller missions have developed the customary forms of missionary service, evangelism, publication, medical work

1 Strong, "Story of the American Board," Boston, 1910, p. 80.

and education. And side by side with this has been a fifth form of service, normally an emergency undertaking, but on account of the many upheavals and wars almost a constant need—relief work.

More than half a century ago arose the question which still finds missions divided, "How far shall the educational work be developed, and to what extent is educational work really the function of a general missionary society?" Few missions have entirely neglected education, but the tendency has been for the general missionary societies to push the responsibility for higher education off on other organizations, just as, in the war crisis, they encouraged the organization of a new agency—the Near East Relief—to assume the burden of a work initiated by missionaries and expressing always the Christian philanthropy of the more favored lands.

Hence, in addition to many schools of primary and secondary grade usually supported by general missionary societies in the Near East, we have a group of colleges, practically all of which are a direct outgrowth of the work of the general missionary societies, but many of them no longer directed by or subsidized by any general Board, and practically all of them which do receive Mission subsidy, compelled to look outside the Mission for an increasingly large share of their growing financial needs.

The word "College" has a somewhat different meaning in Europe than in America, and in the Near East it is somewhat loosely used. There are, however, in the Near East, at least a dozen institutions of American origin bearing the name "College" or the more ambitious title "University" which by reason of their achievements, standards, equipment, leadership and policy, are worthy of inclusion in the group one thinks of when the "American Colleges" are mentioned. Oldest, most richly endowed and best known are, of course, Robert College, Constantinople, and the American University, Beirut, each with invested funds of about four million dollars

and both doing professional university grade work. Associated with these two pioneers in the Near East College Association are four other independent institutions, Constantinople Woman's, International at Smyrna, Sofia in Bulgaria, and Athens in Greece, the latter a young but very vigorous joint effort, with cooperating American and Greek Boards. In addition to these, the ten-year-old Cairo (American) University is also independent. Among the colleges still somewhat closely related to Mission Boards may be mentioned in Greece, Anatolia at Salonika, and Junior College for Women at Athens; in Syria the very significant Aleppo (formerly Central Turkey at Aintab) College closely affiliated with the Armenian Evangelical Churches, and the New Woman's College of the Presbyterian Mission in Beirut, in close cooperation with the American University; in Egypt, Assiut College, one of the strongest in the whole area, and the Woman's College, Cairo, both responsible to the United Presbyterian Mission; and in Persia the rapidly developing Teheran College.

The whole area in which these colleges are established has been tremendously changed by the war and the post-war developments. In ancient times these lands were in the heart of civilization. Then for centuries they seemed to lie asleep, untouched by the passing currents of modern life. But in the war, country boys from the most distant hamlets fought in a dozen battle fronts. With the stories they brought back of strange adventures came the auto bus, making travel easier than since Roman times, and tractors to tear up the turf by the side of primitive plows from Abraham's day. In many a Balkan or Bedouin village today is heard the hum of an aeroplane connecting London and India. And these physical changes are paralleled by equally astonishing social, political and mental changes.

During this period, Greece and Turkey have become republics; Palestine, Syria and Irak mandates; Bulgaria and Persia have new kings; and Egypt has successfully

pressed for more and more of the rights of a fully independent state. And everywhere the new spirit of nationalism, with almost the force of a new religion, has seized the imagination and governed the policies of these newly self-conscious peoples. The old capitulations, whereby foreigners enjoyed exceptional privileges, have gone or are going. State systems of schools are rapidly developing. There is a growing tendency, particularly marked in Turkey, to separate church and state. And while the other Islamic countries have not whole-heartedly accepted all the reforms which Turkey's remarkably able leader Mustafa Kemal Pasha has put into force from Angora, "the acids of modernity" are working into the very heart of the social life, and the political, economic and religious thinking of the entire area.

And whereas previous to 1914 the American and other foreign schools in this area operated with practically no effective governmental control or supervision, everywhere administrators have had to recognize new rules and requirements, which generally tend to bring the schools into closer relation to national systems of education, and toward making them increasingly secular in their emphasis.

In view of the more serious limitations to which foreign institutions have had to adjust themselves, in China particularly, and of the changing world situation everywhere, one may well address himself to the question "Has the Near East Christian College new opportunities?" While fully recognizing the changes mentioned, the administrators and friends of the colleges in the Near East believe that these institutions are facing today and in the immediate future an increasingly large opportunity to influence for good those countries from which they draw their students.

First of all, the colleges are now receiving larger numbers of students from the ruling races of many lands. This has not always been so. Moslems were long dubious about sending their children to foreign schools. Till 1908

it was illegal in Turkey to do so. Further, when the colleges were smaller, less adequately supported and more narrow in their outlook, they did not make the appeal they do today. But from Bulgaria and Greece on the west, where the splendid new plants at Sofia and Athens can accept only a highly selected fraction of the many well-trained applicants, through Turkey, where in Constantinople more than fifty and in Smyrna more than ninety per cent. of the students are Moslems, to Beirut, with nobles and royalty from Persia, Irak, Egypt and Ethopia sending their sons to the university, to Cairo with the classes crowded by sons of wealthy land owners, and to Persia where the highest families patronize Teheran College, one hears the same story; everywhere sons and daughters of the most influential people, government, religious, commercial and literary leaders are coming in large numbers to the American colleges. This is a fact of the greatest significance.

One would not question the value of the pioneer service nobly rendered by the institutions in the earlier days when most of their students were members of the minority races, necessarily having little promise of effective leadership in lands where political power was denied them. The force of circumstances has scattered hundreds of the early graduates to distant lands, and for long the educated leader of the minority groups in Turkey was almost compelled to seek a career abroad. But now the great majority of the students are members of races and groups whose future is in the land of their birth and who can contribute their best directly to the progress of the Near East.

Second, the American colleges are exponents no longer of a hated "western culture" suspected by the leaders and by the rank and file of the people among whom they work. The East has turned its face westward. The Near East eagerly adopts western science and efficiency, and in all but organized religion is tremendously impressed by the western approach to life. And a Near

East, no longer grudgingly but eagerly, almost passionately now seeking what the West has to teach, finds the American college peculiarly suited to mediate the best of the West. The East does not exactly understand why the colleges are in its midst, but it does appreciate that they come with friendliness and a desire to help. And many a perplexed parent, far more confused by the rapid changes in the Near East than are our American parents troubled over the swing at home away from Victorian standards, looks to the American college as the safest interpreter of western standards and the wisest protector to Near East youth.

Third, the improved standards and facilities command respect. Time was when the local schools were so utterly inadequate that anything the westerner offered was far better than any other agency gave, and standards now recognized as low, were acceptable. This again, is no criticism of the very notable work done by the pioneers with limited resources in the face of heavy odds. But the colleges today have recognized the need for higher standards. Several of them have buildings, equipment and income of which many strong colleges at home might be envious. When, for example, the Rockefeller interests, after an exhaustive survey, gave a million dollars to strengthen the medical work at Beirut, standards cannot be lightly dismissed. Graduates of several Near East colleges receive diplomas and degrees valued at par by American graduate schools. Many a Near East B.A. has earned his M.A. or Ph.D. side by side and in the same period of study with graduates of the best colleges in America.

Fourth, the colleges have an enlarged opportunity through their close contact with educational and other leaders in the lands they serve. This, again, is a new opportunity. When the governments had no schools worthy the name, obviously anything an American educator could do to raise general standards was indirect. But now every Near East land is busily engaged in devel-

oping a modern system of education under state control. The obstacles in poor, war-impoverished, largely illiterate lands are stupendous. But the men and women who are undertaking it have almost a missionary passion. They welcome the help the American schools, in various ways, can give. They eagerly welcome graduates to important positions. They frankly ask the American colleges to try experiments impossible in state systems which, if successful, can be taken over. And as at home, so abroad, private colleges have a freedom, a continuity of leadership, and a release from petty and local difficulties which unfortunately in so many places limit public institutions.

And in the fifth place, the American colleges have a greatly increased influence and opportunity because they have increasingly adjusted themselves to the spirit of the new Near East. It has not been easy for administrators who had been entirely free from any effective government regulation to submit to inspection and a considerable degree of control by newly conscious governments. For colleges founded with a definite religious basis and manned by men and women profoundly convinced of the constructive force of the finest religious idealism to be put, as has been necessary in Turkey, on a more secular basis, seemed to some the denial of long cherished ideals. But to the credit of the new rulers of the Near East, the restrictions placed upon the schools have been in general reasonable and directed toward ends which are understandable and, from the point of view of the governments concerned, necessary and wise. By the sincere acceptance of these regulations, the colleges have demonstrated what in old days was seriously doubted, that is, their honest desire to help. For a long time, Moslems, for example, hardly believed that Christians honestly desired to help them. But when from fifty to ninety per cent. of the students are Moslems, when local teachers are given increasing responsibilities, when college officials work in close relation with government officials, and forgetting

there ever were capitulations and special privileges, accept the new conditions, then the colleges are increasingly regarded as really existing to share with the Near East the skill and idealism of the West. The world is learning that as in government, so in religion, imperialism is a spent force. To go back to the old capitulatory régime, and to the requirement of compulsory religious instruction, which non-Christian students resent, would be backward steps, were they possible in lands where the new regulations have been in force. Long ago the Master said that in losing his life one would gain it. And in losing something of their former freedom, and giving up practices which may have served well in an earlier day, the colleges can enter into the deeper life and service of the lands where they are situated. Increasingly the colleges and their administrators share the life of the Near East, and as they do so, their opportunities increase.

For more than sixty years the oldest of these colleges have successfully functioned through the ups and downs of the changing Near Eastern life. They represent today one of the most efficient and far-reaching means whereby the Christian idealism of the West may share with the awakening East its richest gifts. Christianity is full of examples, from the day Peter was reluctantly taught by the Spirit that all things are clean, to our own day, that new opportunities and larger service ever await the eager disciple. And in the Near Eastern Colleges today we are seeing how, through limitations which were at first irksome, and through circumstances not chosen but sincerely accepted, doors of opportunity and service are opened wide.

So long as these colleges can serve the lands in which they are situated with sincere and contagious good will, so long as they are manned by men and women, foreign and native, who count it a high privilege to live and work in the Master's spirit in the Near East with its eager and awakening young people, and so long as they seek honestly and in a friendly way to understand and comply

with the conditions necessary to prevent the abuse of hospitality granted to foreigners, we may expect to see an increasingly large opportunity and a steadily increasing service. As more and more of their graduates assume their places in the life of the communities and nations, the colleges can increasingly look to them for direction and for the leadership now largely in the hands of Americans; and just as the western colleges, founded originally by the idealistic leaders from the East, and long supported largely by funds and teachers from the older communities, now look to their own graduates and neighbors for support, so we may expect these American colleges to become increasingly indigenous and dependent upon their graduates, and increasingly a force for the highest service.

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