COMPETING KINGDOMS

Women, Mission, Nation,
and the American Protestant Empire, 1812–1960

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Lillian Hunt Trasher (1887–1961) felt called in her early twenties to serve as a missionary in Africa and accepted the invitation of a Pentecostal couple to join them in Egypt. Having solicited funds, she went out in 1910, accompanied by her sister Jennie but without the backing of a church board, to Asyut, a city located on the Nile in southern Egypt. Within months of her arrival, she went to pray for a dying young mother. Trasher returned to the Pentecostal mission home with the dead woman’s baby, but her hosts soon lost patience with the infant’s crying. Rather than give the baby back to its family, which did not have the means to feed it, she kept the child. Unfettered by the bureaucracy that would have come from being associated with a board, Trasher rented a home and started an orphanage. She believed that God would provide. The Assiout Orphanage, which later became affiliated with the Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions, grew into a village that at its peak was home to fourteen hundred children and widows and contained its own schools, church, clinic, bakery, dairy, dormitories, and swimming pool. During its first fifty years, roughly eight thousand orphans passed through its doors.¹

Trasher’s orphanage became the centerpiece of the Pentecostal mission in Egypt, producing many of its converts, preachers, and leaders. It surpassed in size and longevity most other foreign missionary projects, and whereas other missionaries were expelled or prevented from returning at critical moments Trasher enjoyed special privileges. She became one of the
most recognized Pentecostal missionaries of the twentieth century. Her supporters followed her story through her letters to evangelical periodicals, features in magazines, biographies, and a movie (The Nile Mother). These works frame her life and the success of her mission as an affirmation of evangelical Christian faith.

The story of Lillian Trasher’s mission in Egypt embodies multiple marginalities. The Assemblies of God mission in Egypt has been overshadowed by the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) mission. Standard accounts have marginalized women in both missions. American missionaries evangelized heavily in the region around Asyut, a city in southern Egypt two hundred and fifty miles up the Nile from Cairo that has received only a fraction of the attention of the capital. Pentecostals and Presbyterians targeted Orthodox Copts, a Christian minority of roughly 10 percent whose story has been muted in the nationalist narrative of Egypt. And Trasher chose the most marginal of people for her ministry: orphaned and abandoned infants and children with disabilities who lacked family in a society that considered the family its basis and saw family lineage as critical to creating and sustaining social and political bonds. Her marginality as well as that of her wards helped ensure her success even when Presbyterians and other missionaries in Egypt began to withdraw.

Trasher’s orphanage sat at the intersection of colonial and national projects and of the colonial and postcolonial state. It was a busy and sometimes dangerous intersection. British colonial officials protected American missionaries, lending them security, material aid, and assistance. Yet the colonial presence engendered resentment on the part of nationalists, who saw missionary and colonial projects as being intimately linked. Given the shortage of social welfare services, locals often supported and patronized missionary institutions, in the process reshaping them. They created schools, hospitals, clinics, and orphanages in the image of the missionary institutions but also in reaction to their presence and agendas. The postcolonial state reversed the protectionism of the colonial state and nationalized missionary institutions that had not been handed over to local churches. Trasher carefully navigated the crosscurrents of anticolonialism, nationalism, and Islamism and the transition from colonial to postcolonial state, keeping her orphanage intact.

This essay focuses on Trasher’s orphanage as a lens through which to
chart how colonial projects protected and local environments reshaped American missionary projects. While this encounter was reciprocal, transforming American missionaries and Egyptians alike, it was not symmetrical, and the overwhelming evidence comes from the American side. The sources have been examined with an eye to unsettling the story of American missionaries in the Middle East by focusing on the foot soldiers—the women workers—and the view of missionaries from the ground.

**PRESbyterians PREPARE THE FIELD**

Pentecostal evangelists in Egypt followed in the footsteps of Presbyterians, who had arrived in Egypt in 1854 and established a base in Asyut early on. The fourth largest city in Egypt, Asyut was the capital of Upper Egypt and a stronghold of Eastern Orthodox Christians, who were considered by Presbyterians to be in need of reform and receptive to Protestant conversion. Indeed, a number of prominent Coptic families in Asyut, most notably the Wissas and Khayatts, became Protestants.

Hanna Wissa relates in his family memoir that his grandfather, Hanna Boktor Wissa, left the Coptic Orthodox Church in 1865 after a confrontation with the bishop of Asyut. His maternal grandfather converted to Protestantism while attending the Syrian Protestant College (later renamed the American University in Beirut). The conversions of the newly emerging landed elite stemmed from a desire to reform religious experience, gain access to education, identify with Western culture, and challenge the authority of the Coptic Orthodox hierarchy. A small circle of wealthy Copts found their interests served by Presbyterian missionaries and helped to finance their institutions. The Khayatts funded a girls’ school and the Wissas a boys’ school, each affixing their name to the school. The Wissas also contributed generously to the building of the Presbyterians’ first church in Asyut, completed in 1870; a larger main church was built on a Wissa property thirty years later.

The Presbyterians enjoyed the support of the board and established self-sustaining, money-making operations such as schools and hospitals. The Pentecostals, by contrast, came out on faith, hoping to raise money from local supporters and those back home; they focused on preaching, prayer, and proselytizing through the distribution of Bibles, Arabic periodicals, and gospel literature. American Protestant missionaries tended to
have different class backgrounds and geographic origins: the Presbyterians hailed from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the northern heartlands; the Pentecostals generally came from the American South or West and states like Missouri and California. (Trasher was born in Florida and raised in Georgia.) The Presbyterians, better educated than the Pentecostals, were elitist and sought out converts from the wealthier classes; the Pentecostals were populists who spent more time with the poor. The groups had very different notions of conversion: Presbyterians focused on learning and indoctrination, Pentecostals on a religious experience that included "baptism by the Holy Spirit" and speaking in tongues. The two Christian sects also had differing notions of gender roles in church and society: the Presbyterians came out mainly as couples in the early days: wives often taught or directed Bible women (locals who read the Bible to illiterate girls and women), while single women mainly taught. The Pentecostals came out as couples or as singles, but missionary wives and single women could preach should they feel divinely chosen for this task. The early Pentecostals were faith healers and left medical evangelizing to the Presbyterians, who started hospitals in Asyut and Tanta and numerous clinics.

Egyptian Copts, whose own church unity was cracking along Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant fissures, saw family resemblances, not stark sectarian differences, in the competing Presbyterians and Pentecostals in Asyut. "One of the weaknesses of the Protestant movement in Egypt," noted Hanna Wissa, writing toward the end of the twentieth century, "was that there were many different Protestant missions trying to do the same thing. They stepped on each other's toes and there were sometimes petty misunderstandings among themselves." This exacerbated tensions among the reformed Copts, "who were supposed to carry the torch" but who had their own squabbles. American missionaries dominated a field crowded by Protestants and Catholics of various nationalities but were beholden to the British for imperial protection.

**Colonial policy encourages private social welfare**

Providing benevolence was a religious obligation that individuals in the Ottoman empire fulfilled through acts of charity and the establishment of trusts. Rulers and the elite had a special social obligation to care for
those in need and demonstrated largesse and power through the funding of soup kitchens, hostels, and hospitals. During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman–Egyptian state increasingly appropriated religious functions and funds, taking over trusts and the care of the poor. Social service was increasingly divorced from indigenous religious institutions. The British occupation of 1882 reversed the trend toward a welfare state, encouraging private social welfare and permitting foreign providers to compete in delivering health, education, and welfare.

Before the advent of orphanages in the nineteenth century, an orphan would most likely have been fostered by a male guardian, presumably a relative, who gave the "gift of care." Abandoned infants and orphans might have been informally or secretly adopted or could have been placed in a hospital–mosque complex such as Maristan Qalawun in Cairo, which contained a religiously endowed orphanage and foundling home for infants. In Islamic family law, which Copts followed on inheritance, an orphan (ydtm or ydtma; plural, ydtm or ydtma) was defined as a child whose father had died. A foundling (laqit or laqita; plural luqata") was not legally an orphan, since the infant's unknown father was probably alive but not married to the infant's birth mother. A foundling was often the product of an illicit sexual encounter or rape but could also have been abandoned when a mother died in childbirth. In the 1830s, the new state-sponsored School for Midwives (Madrasat al-Wilada) contained the first state-run home for foundlings and a rudimentary orphanage; the home hired wet nurses for the infants, and orphans were enrolled along with slaves as the first students in the school. In the second half of the nineteenth century, abandoned children and orphans found refuge in Catholic and Protestant missionary homes in Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said.

Under the British occupation of Egypt, state management of the poor continued; but British imperial policy limited funds allotted to health, education, and other social services to less than 1 percent of the budget. Eager to have private individuals and groups bear the burden of providing social welfare, the British encouraged private initiatives. Public health and social welfare became a patchwork of state, private, and foreign initiatives. The haphazard approach of the colonial authorities was reflected in the distribution of services among various ministries and reliance on efforts from local elites, missionaries, and colonial wives. For example, the British friends of Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, vice consul from 1883 until 1907
and Lord Cromer from 1892, started the Lady Cromer Home, or Foundling Hospital, in a wing of Qasr al-Ayni Hospital in 1898. The British, like their Ottoman–Egyptian predecessors, often seemed more concerned with keeping the poor out of view and off the streets than with providing meaningful services and training. In Cairo and Alexandria, eighty-one children in “undesirable surroundings” were taken off the streets in 1908 and sent to a reformatory in Giza after British colonial officials passed a law dealing with vagrant children whom they suspected of criminality.

British imperialists had an unspoken pact with Christian missionaries. This came in the form of assistance in the colonial setting, removal of obstacles to institutional growth, and protection for missionaries (but not converts). British officials interceded at critical moments to save the lives of those preoccupied with saving souls. Missionaries in turn supported British rule, lending it a veneer of respectability and moral purpose. American missionaries saw their role as spreading the kingdom of God through American forms of Christianity and could not have built their extensive network of hospitals, schools, and orphanages without British imperial support for their projects.

WINNING LOCAL SUPPORT AND AVERTING ATTACKS

When Trasher arrived in Upper Egypt, preachers were plentiful, but there were no orphanages in Asyut or its environs. She resolved to start one. Children initially did not come flocking to the Malja’ al-Aytam al-Khayri bi-Asyut (shortened in English to the Assiout Orphanage). As Trasher wrote, “Then we took in a few children, but at first it was very hard to get them.” Egyptians suspected that Trasher planned to take the orphans to America as slaves. Given Asyut’s historical role as a major depot in the slave trade, which ended only in 1877, and the destination for slave caravans on the “forty days road” (darb al-arba’in) from Darfur and Kordofan in the Sudan, as well as the American history of slavery, the thought was not that strange.

The first year of the orphanage’s existence was rocky. After a child with bubonic plague entered the home, the authorities closed it down temporarily, and Trasher returned to the United States to convalesce. In North Carolina, where she had once worked in a faith-based orphanage, she
became ordained as an evangelist. Upon her return to Egypt, the Assiout Orphanage began to grow. "Every week I have to turn away four or five little ignorant children from lack of space who might be taught and led to Christ," Trasher wrote in 1913. By the next year she had fifty children under her care. An unnamed Turkish woman taught rug making, and Sarah Smith, a missionary from Indianapolis, gave Trasher a hand.

With space tight, Trasher decided to move the home out of the city in 1915. She built across the river in Abnub on a half acre that Balsam Wissa sold her for $250. Balsam, the eldest daughter of Wissa Boktor Wissa, had been one of the first students in the Presbyterian Khayatt Girls’ School. Being based on the east side of the river, the orphanage had room to grow. At the same time, the orphans, whose status was often ambiguous, were removed from the center of town and physically marginalized.

Trasher received support from local elites as well as from foreign backers, raising funds through Pentecostal periodicals, but the Pentecostals had not picked the most propitious moment to launch their missionary effort in Egypt. They arrived after the founding of the first nationalist parties in 1907 and were oblivious to the growing nationalist and Islamic opposition to British occupation. When the Ottoman empire entered the war as an ally of Germany in August 1914, Britain severed Egypt's formal ties to Istanbul and declared it a protectorate. The British kept a tight hold on the country, hoping to avert an uprising in support of Ottoman troops, who twice attempted to cross the Suez Canal during the war. Egyptian notables active in the nationalist movement were silenced under martial law and sent into internal exile on their country estates.

During the war foreign missionaries became targets of anti-imperial dissent. All the Pentecostals, with the exception of Trasher, evacuated Egypt, leaving the nine or ten stations they had built in the hands of "native workers." Trasher stayed on with her staff, which included Shakir Gadallah and two other Egyptian women. Feeding the children in the midst of a spike in prices that multiplied costs challenged their resourcefulness. After the May wheat harvest, when peasants had money, Trasher rode out to villages on a donkey, soliciting funds and food and staying in police stations along the way. She gained the peasants' trust along with donations of food and cash. As Trasher roamed the countryside during the war asking for food for the orphans, the British pressed peasants into the military labor corps and requisitioned their farm animals and hay for
transport and feed. Peasant women took to the fields in record numbers to keep crops coming in and families fed.\textsuperscript{19} That people had something left over to give to the orphans reflects their willingness to share with the poorest of the poor. Trasher's meanderings in the Egyptian countryside made her a familiar figure to village mayors, who later wrote to ask her to take in their widows and orphans.

The orphanage doubled its numbers during the war from roughly fifty to one hundred children. To accommodate the new residents, rooms were added in a process that became a pattern at the home. Once the children got older, they participated in the brick making and laying process. At the end of the war an influenza epidemic that left many children orphaned increased the numbers even more. "We are glad to accept the most needy cases, and have had to enlarge our house, adding four new rooms which are about filled," Trasher wrote in early 1919.\textsuperscript{20} The boys learned trades like carpentry and shoemaking, and the girls were taught sewing, child care, and housework.

As the war wound down and international peace talks were organized, Egyptian nationalists sought a place at the table. They had remained quiet during the hostilities in spite of the resentment they felt at being forced to contribute to the war effort. The British preferred to handle negotiations over Egypt's fate bilaterally with a handpicked government and turned down the request of a delegation of nationalist leaders (a Wafā) to attend peace talks in Paris. The delegation mobilized support with petitions and speeches, becoming the seeds of a new nationalist party. When Wafā leaders refused to go quietly to their estates, colonial officials arrested them. Massive protests erupted throughout Egypt, the protestors calling for the release of their leaders. The British acted quickly to restore order in the capital, where among those protesting were some of Trasher's staunchest supporters, notably Esther Wissa (the daughter of Balsam Wissa and Akhtukh Fanus and the wife of Fahmi Wissa).\textsuperscript{21} In Asyut, events started peacefully but took a violent turn.\textsuperscript{22}

Before the violence erupted an American Presbyterian minister had tried to persuade Trasher to take refuge with his group in one of the schools in Asyut, but she refused to leave the orphanage in Abnub. After communication with Cairo was severed and the banks limited access to funds, Trasher and Auntie Zakiya, the head matron, decided to send all of those children with family in Asyut and nearby villages to their relatives.
The orphanage subsequently became cut off from town and came under attack by looters. A neighbor intervened. “Men, be ashamed!” he apparently said. “These are our own orphans, our own Egyptian children for whom the lady has given her life... and she has never done you any harm. Be ashamed and go somewhere else but to the home of our orphan babies.” While many other foreign institutions and businesses were attacked and burned in the revolt, the orphanage was spared.

When British reinforcements arrived in the region, they forced Trasher and the children to evacuate the orphanage. The boys were moved into one of the American Presbyterian schools in town; the girls and babies were sent to the American Presbyterian Hospital. Auntie Zakiya took charge of the children, awaiting permission to return with them to Abnub.
British officials forced Trasher to join other foreigners being evacuated to Cairo. Having been away from her family for seven years, Trasher decided to use the time of her enforced separation from the children to visit the United States. There she raised funds for the orphanage and registered as an evangelist of the Assemblies of God Church, beginning her official affiliation with a church that did not exist when she left for Asyut in 1910.24

ROYALS, NOTABLES, AND LOCAL EGYPTIANS
HELP FUND THE HOME

In the wake of the Revolution of 1919, Egyptians started new orphanages, sensing that they needed to care for their own orphans and abandoned children rather than leave it to foreigners. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Nazmi spearheaded the effort to open the Malja’ al-Hurriyya (Shelter of Freedom) for boys, and Labiba Ahmad launched an orphanage through her Jam‘iyyat Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat (Society of the Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening).25 Both efforts were based in Cairo and were modeled after missionary institutions; both sought to create good citizens and loyal nationalists.

Trasher’s refuge had little competition in Asyut, to which she had returned in February 1920. She had more requests for entry than she could accommodate. “You cannot imagine how I feel when I have to refuse some [children entry],” she lamented. “There are no other orphanages within hundreds of miles from here and the other orphanages in Cairo and Alexandria will not take in new ones until some of the older ones leave.”26 Rather than continue to turn down children, Trasher decided to expand the home again. A gift in 1921 of fifteen hundred dollars from Sultan (later King) Fu‘ad (r. 1917–36) helped make this enlargement possible.27 His visit to the orphanage was one in a line of visits by Egyptian rulers and foreign royals and nobles, including a queen of Belgium and a lord from Scotland, who sought to demonstrate their benevolence and enhance their prestige through charitable giving.

Asyut’s Coptic elite continued to support the refuge. In 1922, Balsam Wissa’s brothers, Zaki and George, teamed up with Amin Khayatt and Bushra Hanna to buy two plus acres at $2,625 for the orphanage and equipped the land with water and electricity at the added cost of $1,000. In 1928, Amin’s older sister, Amina Khayatt, the wife of Nassif Wissa, donated $3,100 to cover the purchase of two and a half plus additional
acres for the orphanage. This last gift came after Trasher had gone to the shari’a court in Asyut in 1926 to establish a trust (waqf) for the lands and buildings of the Assiout Orphanage. Her strategy deviated from the standard practice of American missionaries, who accumulated property in the name of a board, which then controlled the property. According to the terms of the trust, Trasher could never sell the land but would remain head of the trust as long as she lived. She appointed a committee of interrelated Wissas, Khayatts, and Alexans along with her sister Jennie Benton to administer the trust after her death. Trasher explained, “All those who have helped buy the land are absolutely satisfied, now that the land is made over ‘Wakf’ [sic], as I myself can never sell it.” Elite Copts now felt assured that they were giving to an institution that would serve Upper Egypt for the long term.

It was no accident that the refuge was located next to the Nile Sporting Club, for the same families who sold or donated land to Trasher for her orphanage provided land for the club. The playground of the Asyut elite, the club contained tennis courts, a nine-hole golf course, and a box for charitable donations that Trasher periodically emptied. Women like Lily (Alexan) Khayyat and Esther (Fanus) Wissa, longtime supporters of the orphanage, took out subscriptions, started sewing circles, and sent gifts of wheat, beef, cooked meals, cotton, and cloth. They celebrated births, weddings, and major life events with donations, and adopted Trasher as one of their own. They invited her to meals, took her on outings, and sent her new dresses. “They realize that I have given my life for their children and show their appreciation in many ways,” Trasher wrote in 1924, no longer having to ride out to villages on a donkey. Esther’s son Hanna Wissa remembered this “remarkable lady” from summer visits to his grandparents in Asyut.

Middle-strata merchants and poor workers and peasants also gave gifts in kind or sums of money to the orphanage, ranging from free taxi rides for the children to stocks of soap and other items to wrinkled money. Trasher’s letters are full of stories of local generosity, often from people of humble means. The community valued her commitment to caring for the orphans.

The support of royalty, notable families, and the general public was needed to fund expansions of space and the quotidian feeding of a constantly growing group of children. The orphanage charged no fees for the
orphans it took in and accepted boys under ten and girls under twelve. Lillian wanted the children for the long term in order to be able to work the transformation to body and soul she envisioned. The orphanage set basic rules for admission that required relatives “to sign a paper that they give the children to us until they are eighteen years old,” thereby granting the orphanage legal custody and preventing families from retrieving their children before the work of socialization and conversion was completed.  

The orphanage also accepted children with disabilities, the offspring of lepers, and blind girls (but not blind boys, for whom there was already a home in Egypt).  

Egyptians increasingly turned to the orphanage for help. Fathers often brought in babies after their wives had died from complications of childbirth. Many infants left at the orphanage were thus not technically orphans but offspring of single fathers who had insufficient knowledge, will, or means to raise motherless children. In the days before there was an orphanage, such babies might have been given to a wet nurse, informally adopted by others, or abandoned. The orphanage also accepted foundlings: “About two weeks ago I had some one knock at my door about midnight and hand me a wee tiny baby, just a few hours old which they had found in the street,” wrote Trasher in 1921. “We had one like this one a little while ago, but its head had been injured when it had been thrown away and it went quite blind and then it died.”  

Another set of children arrived with widowed mothers who had no financial resources or willing relatives to help raise their fatherless offspring. The older children were separated from their mothers and placed in dormitories. “It quite often happens,” Trasher explained, “that a child is received with its widowed mother, who earns her support by working in the orphanage, whilst the children receive full training along with the others.” Roughly 10 percent of the population of the orphanage at any given moment consisted of widows, who were indispensable to the orphanage, becoming its main labor force and replacing the servants hired earlier. They performed menial tasks such as doing laundry, cooking, baking, and cleaning (and later, when the orphanage began raising Jersey cattle donated by the American Presbyterian Mission, they milked the cows). Although they were the backbone of the institution, the widows were seen as fellahat (peasant women) and were not permitted to care for their own or other children once weaned “because they were still too
much like the village they had left,” the American missionary Florence Christie noted. The older girls, who were taught to be “clean and cultured” and had been remade into Americanized Pentecostal Christians, cared for the younger ones. For the widows, the orphanage provided an alternative to poverty and hunger, yet it came at a price: they had little say over the upbringing of their children and often experienced enforced separations.

A few “fallen” girls who did not or could not abandon their newborn infants also found refuge in the orphanage with their children. British officials in Cairo asked Trasher to give safe haven to one such unmarried mother: her boyfriend had been killed by her father and brother, both of whom had then been tried and executed, but the girl’s mother and a younger brother still presented a threat to her safety. “We would be very grateful if you could see your way to admitting this girl to your home,” the authorities requested, wanting “to give her a chance to lead a decent life
and avoid the risk of assassination by her family.” Trasher accepted the mother and child as well as girls in similar situations: “Others have come like this and have been wonderfully saved.”39 In such situations, while the British provided the mission with security, the missionaries helped the colonial authorities to care for individuals whose social networks had collapsed or did not exist.

Egyptians supported the orphanage in spite of its religious agenda, and in some cases because of it, for it provided a service others were unwilling to provide. The shame of illegitimacy hung over those children whose mothers were not married or whose fathers were unknown, making it hard for them to be accepted into the larger society and for society to care for them. Another set of stigmatized children who ended up at the home were those with physical disabilities, including children with birth defects and those injured in accidents. For the children, the orphanage became a large family.

THE ANTIMISSIONARY MOVEMENT
AND ITS AFTERMATH

Trasher opened the doors of the orphanage wide, not denying entrance based on religion. “I take into my orphanage Mohammedans, Syrians, Catholics— anyone. My work is not denominational, although I myself am Pentecostal,” she explained.40 Under the terms of the charitable trust written in 1926, the orphanage was established “as a home for the training and education of poor orphans, of any religion and of any denomination.” The trust stipulated that Muslim children were to be trained in Islam, and Christian children “instructed in the teachings of the Assemblies of God.”41 Although it was difficult to ascertain the exact number of Muslims in the orphanage, Muslim children were a minority of roughly 10 percent. There is no indication that Trasher provided an Islamic education for her Muslim wards and no mention of going to mosques or bringing imams to instruct them. This may well have been a fictive strategy enacted in court to get the land placed in a trust and avoid state interference. Unlike Egyptians, who saw infants as born with a religious identity inherited from a father (or mother in the case of Jews), Pentecostal missionaries saw religious faith as something to be instilled, taught, and experienced.

Serving as matriarch and patriarch of the orphanage family, Trasher
sought to save souls. In winter 1926, she claimed to see results. "After crying and praying like the sound of many waters, they began to testify," Trasher wrote. "One little Mohammedan boy got up on top of the bench and testified saying, 'In my village I was a sinner but now God has saved me and if I was cut in little pieces I would not serve idols.' . . . Souls are being saved and others baptized in the Holy Spirit."42 The intensification of Protestant evangelizing in Egypt in the late 1920s and early 1930s led to a record number of revivals, conversions, and baptisms. But the open attempts to proselytize among Muslims as well as Christians led to a backlash that peaked in the summer of 1933.

An episode that began as a confrontation between a fifteen-year-old orphan girl named Turkiyya Hasan and a matron in the Swedish Salaam Orphanage in Port Said galvanized the country and led to investigations of missionary institutions. "I am very much in need of the prayers of all the Lord's children as there is a great stir among all of the Muslims against the missionaries here," Trasher wrote in a letter home on June 23, 1933.43 A correspondent in Asyut for the daily Arabic newspaper al-Jihad, which prided itself on being in the vanguard of the antimissionary movement, called upon the authorities to investigate the orphanage.44 Trasher admitted to the inspection officials sent by the governor that the Muslim children went to Christian services along with the other children. She explained that hers was a faith-based enterprise—"the Lord supplies our needs"—and she told them about her own "call to the work." She gave them copies of financial reports, pamphlets, and, upon request, a Bible. The governor subsequently called Trasher in for a meeting; while thanking her for what she had done for the poor children of Egypt, he informed her that they were going to take the Muslim children out of the orphanage and build new refuges for them.45

In a move celebrated by al-Jihad, government officials returned to remove the Muslim children. The newspaper reported, "July 8th, 1933, was a day of great joy at Asyut when about 64 Moslem boys and girls were taken away from Miss Lillian's Orphanage."46 Although Trasher was relieved that she had not been forced out of Egypt like the matron of the Port Said orphanage, she lamented the loss of the children: "Words cannot describe the sad sight as they took them away! . . . Pray that the teaching of years will go with them and not die."47
The antimissionary movement transformed missionary orphanages in Egypt into institutions theoretically open only to Christians and Jews. The state protected Muslims from evangelizing but felt little compulsion to do the same for Orthodox Copts, many of whom were also troubled by Protestants' proselytizing. Although one could never know the identity of a foundling, the myth that the Christian orphanages served only Christians became convenient.

From the 1930s on, the large American Presbyterian mission began retrenching in reaction to the antimissionary movement in Egypt and decreasing support for foreign missions at home. But Pentecostals were not on the retreat. The orphanage that stood at the center of the mission in Egypt settled back into its routine. When the writer Jerome Beatty visited in 1939, there were 647 orphans and 74 widows, and the orphanage had grown into a virtual village. Christie, who taught, delivered babies, and supervised the girls in this period, described working for Trasher:

"She possessed a loving, but strong personality, which people sometimes found hard to follow. . . . She was known to be difficult to work for also because of her high expectations and demands." There was only one Mama. The other women, as Christie quickly learned, were Aunties.

The orphanage instilled American Pentecostal culture and values. The children learned English in addition to Arabic and dressed in American-style clothes that were either sent from the United States or made at the orphanage. While cutting patterns and sewing clothes, they listened to hymns on the gramophone, including "Onward, Christian Soldiers!" "We Are Going Down the Valley," and "Joy to the World." They did not play recordings of Umm Kulthum, the most famous Egyptian singer of the century, whose records were available from the 1920s.

Along lines that were typical of industrial schools boys were taught artisan skills like carpentry and chair making, and girls were trained in such domestic tasks as infant care and sewing. Both had farming tasks, the girls feeding chickens and collecting eggs, and the boys working with barn animals. The boys attended primary and secondary schools at the orphanage and could continue on to college if they had the aptitude. They took up the trades into which they had been apprenticed or took up careers as teachers, clerks, and pastors. Some of the boys became active in the Assemblies of God Church in Egypt, forming its core. They evan-
gelized in villages, started schools and churches, and staffed the missions scattered about Egypt.52

Girls attended a general school in preparation for marriage. Trasher made it clear that the girls were not to be hired out as domestic servants, the once-expected fate of female orphans; working in a home around unrelated men would compromise their reputations and hurt their chances for marriage. Even if they excelled in their studies, they were not offered the option of continuing their educations. In this, Trasher’s goal differed from that of the American Presbyterians, who championed girls’ education and started secondary schools and colleges for girls in Asyut and Cairo. And it contrasted with the agenda of Egyptian feminists, who endorsed girls’ secondary and higher education as the main path to women’s progress and pushed open the doors of Cairo University in the late 1920s. Most of the orphan girls married; some did not and stayed in the home as helpers. A few felt called to join American female missionaries in their work outside the orphanage. This was the only career path available to them.

Trasher maintained a strict gender segregation that was more Egyptian than American. Boys and girls had separate dormitories and schools and separate seating in church and the dining hall. With the exceptions of siblings, boys and girls were not allowed to talk to one another. When boys were ready to leave the orphanage, they approached Trasher to ask permission to marry one of the girls. She decided if they were suitable, allowing them to meet in her presence but not to date or court. She did this at a time when Egyptian elites were challenging such conventions, calling for meeting before marriage and endorsing the ideal of companionate marriage. Trasher also did not allow blind girls to marry, a policy Christie characterized as a practical approach to “an already severe problem.”53

During the Second World War, American missionaries were evacuated from Egypt. Those in Asyut headed south to the Sudan. Trasher stayed on but sent Christie to America to raise funds, which were in short supply during the war. When cities such as Alexandria were bombed by the Germans, the orphanage opened its doors to those of its grown children who had become refugees. The orphanage survived the war intact but faced challenges in its wake, when cholera and malarial epidemics devastated the countryside. After the war, as Presbyterians were reducing their presence, Pentecostals sent reinforcements to help Trasher.
"It is whispered around the city of Assiut that it is always good to give an offering to the orphanage when God has been good to you!" wrote Lester Sumrall in 1951. With the donations it received from Egyptians and Americans, the Assiout Orphanage continued to expand. Trasher decided to transform the orphanage hospital into a nursery for babies over seven months of age and to build a new hospital for sick children. Ground was broken for the new building in late 1951, and it opened the following year. That year marked a sea change in Egyptian politics.

Revolutionary winds transformed Egypt in 1952 when a group of officers led by Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918–70) toppled King Farouk (r. 1936–52) and inaugurated military rule by a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). This effectively put an end to the British presence in Egypt as well as to the presence of most of the foreign missionaries they had assisted and protected. Nasser, who was born in Alexandria, had spent many summers and some school years in his father's natal village, Bani Murr, which was adjacent to Abnub and within walking distance of the orphanage. His sympathy toward the refuge and its founder helped to save it from the fate of other missionary institutions and its founder-director from expulsion.

When the RCC toured Upper Egypt in March 1953 as part of an attempt to consolidate power by rallying popular support, they stopped at the orphanage. Prime Minister Muhammad Naguib led the entourage of government officials, local leaders, reporters, and photographers that visited Trasher and the children on the afternoon of March 24. Naguib's sister had stopped by the orphanage earlier that month to lay the groundwork for the visit. Its purpose was to soften the image of the colonels and generals who had come to power through a coup in July 1952, abrogated the Constitution in December, and banned political parties in January 1953, allowing only the Muslim Brothers, who remained a potent political force, to operate. The RCC also hoped to demonstrate through the visit to the orphanage their concern for the poor and their genuine interest in social welfare.

Before departing, Naguib inscribed a message in the guest book, part of which read, "I call upon all those who are engaged in social reform and
activities to visit this institution and learn from it what they should do if they really wish to achieve." The leading Arabic and English dailies—al-Akhbar, al-Ahram, and the Egyptian Mail—covered the visit, giving the regime a human face and the orphanage widespread publicity. The pieces transformed Lillian Trasher from a missionary into a social worker to fit revolutionary times and new social agendas.58 Trasher noted that the nice things Naguib said “helped to give the people of Egypt a more friendly feeling toward us.”59 Trasher needed this political capital if she and her institution were to survive revolutionary transformations. Naguib himself did not survive the struggle for power among the revolutionary officers and was placed under house arrest.

In September 1952, the revolutionaries limited agricultural landholdings to two hundred feddans (a feddan is slightly larger than an acre) and later lowered the limit to one hundred feddans. They undercut the main sources of wealth of the elite landowning families such as the Wissas, Khayyats, and Alexans who were Trasher’s original patrons. The authorities then began to appropriate and nationalize businesses, properties, hospitals, and schools (including, in the 1960s, the Khayatt Girls’ School and the Wissa Boys’ School, razing the latter). The Nile Sports Club, a favorite retreat of wealthy Upper Egyptians, became the Asyut Sports Club for police.60 The new name and beneficiaries showed the clear shift of power from the landed elite to the military and security forces. The orphanage could no longer look to notable families as major benefactors. In any case, in the 1940s Trasher had already reconstituted the board of the orphanage, replacing deceased Coptic friends with orphans and representatives of the Assemblies of God.

The days of the American Presbyterians, whose infrastructure and friendship had aided Trasher, were numbered after the Revolution. In retreat from the 1930s, the Presbyterians gradually transferred most of their schools, hospitals, and other properties (including the Fowler Orphanage) to the Egyptian Evangelical Church. This process of indigenization was meant to avoid confiscations. The Presbyterians phased out their mission in the 1960s.61 In contrast, the Assemblies of God were on the upsurge in America, and their missionary zeal was strong.

When the United States decided not to fund Nasser’s Aswan dam project, which was designed to power industrial development, strains in American–Egyptian relations grew. To raise funds for development,
Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. The British, French, and Israelis quickly launched a tripartite attack to topple the regime. Americans were evacuated along with other foreigners from Egypt, but once again Trasher stayed put. “Thank God, everything with us is just the same as it has always been,” she wrote to reassure her supporters in America. The ladies of the Women’s Missionary Committee and other supporters continued to send supplies of clothing, linen, toys, and equipment.62

Trasher did not cut back her activities or plan to leave. At the start of 1957, the number of residents at the orphanage stood at 1,035, not including refugees from the Suez War.63 The next year Trasher built a new school to accommodate the growing numbers, and supporters sent supplies. When a new car got held up in customs, she appealed directly to Nasser to waive the duties. His response—“I would like to tell you that your work for the orphans is very much appreciated by everyone in this country”—reassured Trasher. “I feel it will give me by far the greatest pristage [sic] I have ever had,” she wrote, anticipating that Nasser’s blessing would help her in dealing with the Egyptian authorities.64 The Egyptian press recognized her as “Mother of a Thousand.”65

No longer young, Trasher turned to carefully updating her affairs. She intended to run the orphanage as long as she could and then turn it over to
a team of handpicked successors—a protégé from the orphanage and Assemblies of God missionaries from America. She subverted designs on the property by Habib Yunis, the Egyptian treasurer of the Assemblies of God in Egypt, whose motives she suspected.66 “Everything has been settled as we wanted it in the [Ministry of] Social Affair[s],” she wrote to the head of the Foreign Board.67 If earlier in her career she had recognized the power of Asyut elites, she now realized that power lay in the hands of the new military elite, which had its own social agenda. She made arrangements with the Asyut office of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the office responsible for inspecting and certifying the orphanage. Trasher’s hope was that the orphanage, which numbered 1,340 in 1960, would survive under a system of checks and balances—officials of the local Ministry of Social Affairs, orphan successors, and advisors from the Assemblies of God Foreign Board—after her death.

Trasher cut short a trip to the United States in 1960 when she grew ill, not wanting to die and be buried away from Egypt and her orphans. She returned to Asyut, where she celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the orphanage in February 1961. She died later that year on December 17, 1961. The Egyptian and Pentecostal press mourned the passing of a woman called alternatively a “saint,” “virgin mother of thousands of Egyptians,” “Nile Mother,” and “Mama” Lillian. Many of the former residents of the orphanage returned for her funeral, the largest in Asyut’s history: a six-horse carriage pulled the body through the streets of the city to a plot in the orphanage cemetery, where she was buried alongside helpers and many of her children. She had sought to instill American Christian culture and values in the orphans and abandoned children under her care; by the end of her life, after fifty years in Egypt, she considered Egypt her home, the orphanage her family.

CONCLUSION

Lillian Trasher’s orphanage survived real and potential nationalist assaults at pivotal moments—the Revolution of 1919, the antimissionary movement of 1933, and the Free Officers Revolution in 1952—because it targeted an underserved community that sat at the margins of society. While Presbyterians were in retreat from the 1930s, Pentecostal enthusiasm for for-
eign missions grew, and the Assiout Orphanage continued to flourish, surpassing in size and longevity other, better-endowed foreign missionary projects. The orphanage proved to be the most enduring part of the Pentecostal mission in Egypt. It also became an important symbol of the power of faith for the Assemblies of God Church, one of the fastest growing churches in the world. In recent decades, the orphanage, which was sometimes known as Miss Lillian's Orphanage during her lifetime and became known as the Lillian Trasher Memorial Orphanage after her death, has become a destination for young North American volunteers, who give service to affirm their faith.

Lillian Trasher had an uncanny ability to navigate the crosscurrents of political change, thus ensuring the longevity and success of the mission. At critical moments British colonial officials and, later, American officials interceded with help, and a broad base of Americans and other Westerners supported the project with donations. Trasher found a niche in Asyut precisely because Egyptians of all classes supported the venture, though some felt strongly that the orphanage should not raise Muslims, who were removed from the home in the 1930s. While the colonial state relied on a patchwork of social welfare providers, the postcolonial state moved to take over many of these projects, ousting missionaries and foreigners. Trasher was permitted to stay on in Egypt when others were expelled or asked to leave because she had earned the trust and admiration of Egyptians at the highest levels.

The marginality of women and Pentecostals in the missionary field, Asyut and Copts in Egypt, and orphans in Muslim society all served to shelter Trasher's undertaking. While most of the children in the orphanage came after the death of one or both parents, the social shame associated with illegitimacy and birth defects surrounded them all and protected the mission of the orphanage. Trasher cultivated local support from Egyptians who preferred to subcontract the raising of such children to foreigners and foreign support from those who saw her mission as worthwhile. Her initial independence from a board or bureaucracy gave her broad scope for working with local inhabitants and foreign donors in launching and expanding the home. Ultimately the orphanage worked because the locals shaped it. The marginality of the missionary, the location, and the children allowed the orphanage to grow and flourish in unimagined ways. The
children raised one another, the first generation of grown girls and boys in turn caring for the next, creating a sense of family for those without the bonds of kinship. This was crucial for their life within the orphanage and later in the larger society outside of it. The labor of widows was also critical to sustaining the home, but shelter came at a price: many of the widows were physically separated and socially distanced from their children. The widows, though, at least maintained ties with their transformed children. Those single mothers who felt forced by social circumstances to abandon their children at birth could not maintain ties: Trasher became the Nile Mother of their children.

Lillian Trasher’s mission challenges the narrative of missionaries in Egypt and the broader Middle East. Historical accounts, based mostly on the memoirs, writings, and records of the male leaders of the Presbyterian and Congregationalist movements, show a distinction between evangelizing and modernizing and a shift from proselytizing to providing social services. While this shift may hold for male missionaries, it does not easily apply to the women, who composed the majority of the rank and file of the missionary movement from the late nineteenth century. They were engaged from the outset in social welfare projects, starting or working in schools, hospitals, clinics, and orphanages that consistently fused social work with proselytizing. The social welfare work cannot uncritically be characterized as modernizing. Trasher’s mission endorsed certain medical treatments, gender roles, and religious rituals that were at odds with prevailing expectations of modernity. The trajectory of Trasher’s work also challenges the periodization of mission history. While missionaries from liberalizing Protestant churches were in retreat from the 1930s, Pentecostals enjoyed an upsurge in the United States and abroad. Trasher’s institution weathered the storms that came with decolonization and thrived.

NOTES

1 While Asyut is the preferred transliteration for the town, I will use the spelling for the orphanage (Assiout) that Lillian Trasher used for it. For background, see Beth Baron, “Orphans and Abandoned Children in Modern Egypt,” Between Missionaries and Dervishes: Interpreting Welfare in the Middle East, ed. Nefissa Neguib and Inger Marie Okkenhaug, 12–34 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
2 Jerome Beatty, “Nile Mother,” American Magazine (July 1939), 55; Lester Sumrall,
Lillian Trasher and the Orphans of Egypt 163


6 Ibid., 42–43, 155 note 81.

7 Ibid., 103.


11 Sharkey, American Evangelicals in Egypt.

12 Trasher, Word and Witness, October 20, 1913, 2.

13 Muḥafazat Asyūṭ, Asyūṭ fī līf Sanawah (Cairo: Matba’at Nahdat Misr, 1962), 9.

14 Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (FPHC), Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, File cards, 0504 074.

15 Trasher, Word and Witness (October 20, 1913), 2.


20 Trasher, Latter Rain Evangeli (March 1919), 15.

21 Beth Baron, Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chaps. 5–7.


23 Trasher, “God’s Protection through a Reign of Terror,” Latter Rain Evangeli (September 1919), 16.


26 Trasher, *Pentecostal Evangal* (July 18, 1925), 10.
28 FPHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Deeds, 0795 043.
29 FPHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Waqf Document in Arabic and English translation, 0795 043.
30 FPHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Explanation of Deeds, 0795 043.
33 Wissa, *Assiout*, 176–79.
38 Christie, *Called to Egypt*, 45–46.
41 FPHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Waqf, 0795 043.
42 "A Big Revival in Egypt," *Pentecostal Evangal* (March 27, 1926), 11.
44 Al-Jihad (July 3, 1933) in Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS), RG 209, box 26, folder 38.
46 Al-Jihad (July 10, 1933) in PHS, RG 209, box 26, folder 38.
51 Virginia Danielson, "Artists and Entrepreneurs: Female Singers in Cairo during the 1920s," *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and

52 Samu’il Mishriqi, Tarikh al-Madhab al-Khamsini fi Misr (Cairo: al-Majma’ al-‘Amm li-Kana’is Allah al-Khamsiniyya, 1985).

53 Christie, Called to Egypt, 53.

54 Sumrall, Lillian Trasher, 38.


56 Seton-Williams and Stocks, Blue Guide: Egypt, 476.

57 Al-Ahram (March 25, 1953); al-Akhbar (March 25, 1953); FFHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Scrapbook; Christie, Called to Egypt, 142–43; “General Naguib’s Visit to Assiut,” Pentecostal Evangel (February 13, 1955), 2.

58 Al-Ahram (March 25, 1953); al-Akhbar (March 25, 1953); FFHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, Scrapbook; Christie, Called to Egypt, 142–43; “General Naguib’s Visit to Assiut,” Pentecostal Evangel (February 13, 1955), 2.


60 Muhafazat Asyut: al-‘Id al-Qawmi, 18 April 1982, 37.


64 FFHC, Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, 1094 2477, Gamal Abdel Nasser to Lillian Trasher, Cairo, October 13, 1959; Lill to Jen, Assiout, October 20, 1959.


66 Christie, Called to Egypt, 176.