“Go, My Daughter and Don’t Retreat: Syrian and American Women Physicians Reach for Themselves and Christ”

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The mother of Dr. Saniyya Habboub uttered these words of encouragement to her frightened daughter on the eve of her departure to study medicine in the United States in 1927. Habboub’s mother was adamant that her daughter not abandon her dream to become a physician, something she achieved at considerable cost. Raised in an illustrious Beiruti family, Habboub attended American Protestant missionary institutions in Lebanon. Although a Sunni Muslim who did not convert to Christianity, Habboub was considered by the American missionaries to be a model product of American Protestant education. In the course of her lifetime, and through her entire professional career, she received support from and maintained friendships with, numerous Americans she encountered through her education, work, and benevolent activities. Habboub described America as “my holy land, where I passed the best years of my life.” She returned to Lebanon, however, where she spent her entire professional life caring for poorer patients and particularly women. This paper, using letters, archival documents, and biographical dictionaries, interprets the lives and work of two women doctors who were associated with the American Mission in Lebanon, Saniyya Habboub and Mary Pierson Eddy. Both women’s lives were framed within two broader, complex transnational phenomena. They were part of a small but growing trend beginning in the mid-late nineteenth century, when missionary and indigenous women from the field—encouraged both by Mission officials in the overseas Protestant mission movement, and some local elites—began to train and work as doctors. Women pursued medicine as a way to “reach” women. Missionary doctors such as Eddy, the daughter of missionaries in Lebanon, envisioned their medical work as a way to spread the Gospel and bring their patients to Christ. Indigenous women physicians such as Saniyya Habboub pursued medicine to primarily achieve the humanitarian aims of relieving the suffering of women, work which could be perceived of as having incipient feminist objectives (although most women doctors probably would not have used this term). The other broader phenomenon that frames the biographies of Habboub and Eddy is the role that “Protestant, American” culture played as a formative influence on the lives and practices of women doctors in this period. This paper will explore what, exactly constituted the concepts of “American Protestant” education and culture, and how medicine, in particular played a part in the story. In unstated, subtle ways, women appropriated what was intended to be a religious message in order to study science, and assert themselves as professional women at a time when women physicians were considered oddities. Women travelled all over the globe both to obtain their medical education and practice medicine, and, along the way, were transformed by these experiences – some more than others. Some women “found” their religious and national mission, while others became unmoored from their national identity. Ironically, Protestant, American culture inadvertently and unintentionally facilitated the construction of transnational identities.