Religion and Identity
Mission at the Intersection of Religion and Empire

by Martin Accad

Martin Accad is the third generation of a family deeply involved in building genuine loving relationships with Muslims and sharing the life and call of Jesus with them. He obtained a Ph.D. in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations from Oxford University in 2001 and is presently Professor of Islamic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, and at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon. He also directs ABTS' Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, their annual conference on the Middle East and Islam, and their new Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies (beginning fall 2012).
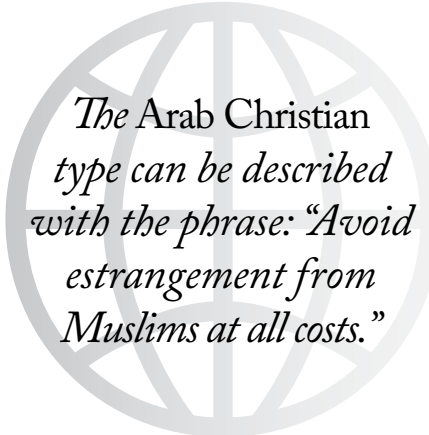
Editor's Note: A version of this paper was originally presented at the September 2011 gathering of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Phoenix, AZ.

Today we live in an incredibly interconnected world with our Muslim neighbor. There is hardly such a thing as a significant local or regional issue any longer. Global connectivity prevents it. If an issue is significant, chances are it is already a global issue. It is being blogged about; there are Facebook groups advocating one position or another in connection with it; and there are opinion shapers tweeting about it and shaping the views of "followers." Every local Muslim context is caught up in this new connectivity, where global events quickly reinterpret what is significant.

This global conditioning is reflected in a statement written for the Christian news media following the killing of Osama bin Laden. Charles Kimball, author of *When Religion Becomes Lethal*, suggests that "[t]his dramatic development highlights many critically important factors that converge at the intersection of religion and politics today."[1] He calls us to "recognize that the conditions that helped create and sustain Osama bin Laden's extremism continue to exist: *unrepresentative, autocratic rulers* in many predominantly Islamic lands, perceived heavy-handed and predatory *U.S. political, military and economic involvement* in many of these same countries, and the deep frustrations with *the plight of Palestinians* after more than 40 years of military occupation." (emphasis mine) Kimball further points out that "[w]hile the vast majority of Arabs and Muslims have rejected Bin Laden's violent extremism, the 'Arab Spring' upheavals throughout the Middle East and the urgent need for real progress in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict underscore the sources of frustration that must be addressed constructively." He concludes: "It is important to remember that Bin Laden's movement took root when Soviet troops occupied Afghanistan and gained strength when U.S. troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia."

"What do all these 'regional-gone-global' issues have to do with mission?" you may ask. Again, I believe that these political issues stretch and condition

other distant contexts of Muslim ministry. There is an increasing sensitivity to what I call "the intersection of Religion and Empire." It has implications everywhere. As a missionary friend of mine told an audience of young people preparing for the mission field, "Do not even think of going on mission to anywhere in the Muslim world before having developed a sophisticated and well-researched understanding on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. And when you have, it better be one that takes very seriously the issues of social justice affecting the Palestinian people."

You cannot carry the gospel to the Muslim world today without having a clear and well-articulated opinion on the Palestinian tragedy, on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and on US global military involvement and its offensive neo-colonial support for autocratic regimes and dictators to guard its own economic interests. Today, these issues are particularly relevant, and they politicize the context of our evangelistic witness. The US has generally adopted an unprincipled wait-and-see approach to the various manifestations of the recent "Arab Spring," driven by the priority of guarding its strategic economic alliances, regardless of moral considerations. Furthermore, and astoundingly, at this time it stands nearly alone against the world in its commitment to veto the Palestinian bid for statehood (submitted this past September to the United Nations).

If I were an American today, I would have to ask myself: On what basis is anyone in the Muslim world going to give me permission to claim I have anything good to bring to them? Yet, that is what Jesus has commissioned us to take to the world: the Good News! Indeed, the current state of global affairs should not only be an embarrassment to Americans in a Muslim context; it is also an embarrassment to Arab Christians, whose evangelical identity, issuing from historic American Protestant missionary work, immediately associates them with

everything American. We must ask, "Where do we go from here?" Could it be that, as evangelicals, we have lost any credibility, any permission, to carry the gospel to the world? I do believe that in the midst of all this we might still have a role. It might even be argued that it is when the situation in the world is really "bad news" that Good News makes the most sense. It is the expression of this Good News that needs to be reconsidered, revisited, transformed, and shaped in line with the realities of the age.

I will argue in this paper that, interestingly, this perception of a *Western* reality so threatening to the East (as described above), together with the de facto association of Christians in the

The Arab Christian type can be described with the phrase: "Avoid estrangement from Muslims at all costs."

East with the "Christian" West, is not a new phenomenon in history. I begin first with the rift that has developed today among evangelicals in regards to the contextualization of ministry among Muslims (the controversy over the illegitimacy of so-called "Insider Movements," in my view, essentially boils down to the inability of some evangelicals to find anything redeemable in Islam, an unfortunate derivative of the reductionist perception of Islam as a single monolith). Secondly, and most important, I suggest this rift in Western mission perspective is a modern continuation of an age-old ambiguity, one that Christians of the East have faced for centuries in

relationship with Islam. Historically it has often reflected the nature of an Eastern Christian's relationship with the West, which today takes on global proportions. Thirdly, I will look briefly at various Christian attitudes and approaches to Islam that are possible in our modern context, and focus a little bit on what I call "the *kerygmatic* attitude." In closing, I will reflect briefly on a couple of attitudes and stances that have become important components of my understanding of ministry among Muslims, and which I suggest might also be important components of a healthy missional approach in the contemporary Muslim context.

Two Ways of Being Christian in the World Today

George Sabra, professor of Systematic Theology and Academic Dean at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, argues that there have been two types of attitudes that Christians of the East have adopted toward Islam throughout history.[2] For lack of better labels, he calls the first type the *Arab Christian,* and the other the *Eastern Christian.* It is important to note that Sabra is consciously in the realm of typology when he seeks to substantiate this thesis. He specifically makes the point that his typological categories are "not a matter of polls and statistics," but are more philosophically than statistically based.[3] His categorization is, indeed, based on experience, observation, and reflection, not on strict empirical research. As such, he runs the risk of generalization and oversimplification. But if these warnings are kept in mind, the two types are extremely useful in thinking about the relations of Christians and Muslims in the East throughout history. With the same warning kept in mind, I will proceed later to extend this typological approach to a globalized perspective on East and West, Christianity and Islam.

The *Arab Christian* type, Sabra argues, can be described with the phrase: "Avoid estrangement from Muslims

at all costs." The alternative *Eastern Christian* type may be described with the phrase: "Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs."[4] The Arab Christian type is an "accommodation-ist" who will do anything to avoid rocking the boat, seeking acceptance from the fourteen-centuries-old Muslim neighbor. As a result, this Arab Christian type has been characterized by openness and a search for common ground that might lead to greater cooperation with Muslims. The Eastern Christian type, on the other hand, is one that seeks and affirms distinctiveness from the Muslim neighbor, often rejecting even the legitimacy of a common Arab identity (hence the focus on Eastern rather than Arab). The result is a real or perceived antagonism toward neighboring Islam, and a natural drift toward an identification with the West.

It may be noted, at this point, that Sabra's scheme assumes three main roles in this interfaith/intercultural drama: (1) *the Christian of the East,* (2) *the Muslim of the East,* and (3) *the West.* It is in relating with that entity called the West, and with respect to daily interaction with the Muslim of the East, that the Christian of the East embraces the type either of Arab Christian or of Eastern Christian. In the remainder of his article, Sabra surveys some important periods in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, pointing out how these three roles have been taken on by various actors in that history, and how each of the two types appropriately fits various categories of Christians.

One disturbing feeling that emerges as one considers Sabra's framework is that both types of Christians from the East seem to embrace a stance toward Islam largely out of fear: fear of extinction. As a result, the Arab Christian adopts the self-preserving strategy of the chameleon, while the Eastern Christian becomes a hedgehog. The Arab Christian seeks to blend, often to the point of self-effacement, whereas

*T*he Eastern Christian *type may be described with the phrase: "Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs."*

the Eastern Christian is self-protective to the point of antagonizing the Other continuously. There are, in my view, serious missiological problems with both animals. The chameleon's interaction with Islam often becomes syncretistic, or at best mainly concerned with existential matters for self-preservation. The hedgehog's interaction will tend toward being polemical (lit. "warlike," from Greek *polemos*), relationally hurtful, or in some milder fashion, adopts a defensive, apologetic position.

But both types will objectify the Other rather than interact subject-to-subject, fulfilling that proverbial dictum that "people fear what they don't understand." The essential problem, as I see it, is that fear is often born from a sense of being fundamentally different from a certain other, which leads to a fear of being either rejected or harmed by that 'other.' And by objectifying the "different Other," we lock ourselves into a perpetual subject-object relationship, instead of being capable of relating subject-to-subject.

This fear, then, would be symbolic of the Christian of the East, whether Arab or Eastern, to continue Sabra's categories. But this composite Christian of the East would also suffer from an inferiority complex, one based on real demographic inferiority that then distorts into a psychological sense of inferiority. In order to cope with this psychosis, the Arab Christian type would develop the coping mechanism of self-effacement by blending into the local majority in order to experience a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the Eastern Christian type would develop the coping mechanism of local self-segregation for the benefit of embracing a larger identity with global Christianity. Again, by fulfilling their need to belong, they antagonize the neighbor, who is kept at arm's length.

The impact of this fear and inferiority needs to be addressed more significantly in mission today. Based on our use of Sabra's typology, which effectively marks two psychotic extremes, we ought to seek an approach to the Church in mission among Muslims that encourages a balanced and healthy personality type. That is what I will attempt to do in the final section of the present paper. But before I do so, I want to further examine the present manifestation of these two psychological types in evangelical perspectives on mission to Muslims.
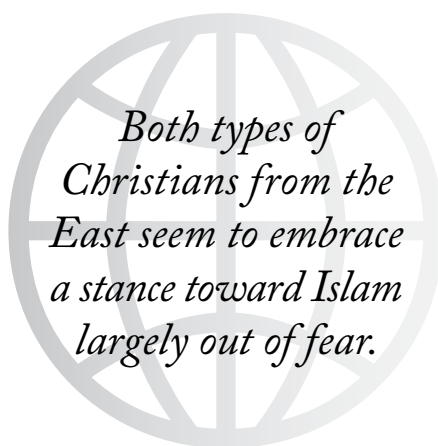
Two Approaches to Islam among Evangelicals Today

Traditionally, evangelicals have shied away from the concept of interfaith dialogue because in their minds it has often implied giving up on evangelism. In a 2010 paper entitled, "Recent Changes in Christian Approaches to Islam,"[5] Patrick Sookhdeo, an influential evangelical voice who stands against dialogue with Islam, surveys with suspicion and great concern the new trends of "dialogue with Islam" that have emerged among evangelicals in recent years, and more particularly since 9/11. He identifies the roots of this dialogical approach in liberal theology, and describes it as little more than *accommodationism*. He warns that "the current evangelical practice of interfaith dialogue and accommodation seriously threatens to jeopardize evangelism, especially among Muslims." He also accuses evangelicals engaged in dialogue with Muslims of naïveté and of ignorance of the true nature of Islam.

This accusation has been repeatedly leveled against those evangelicals who, in 2007, signed the Yale response to the now-famous "Common Word" document. Briefly, in October 2007,

a group of 138 Muslim leaders from around the world issued the so-called "A Common Word between Us and You" statement.[6] It was written in a very gracious style, adopting as common ground with Christians the same common ground that Jesus had established as the foundation of 'the Law and the Prophets' (Matthew 22:37–40), namely, "love of God and love of neighbor." The letter's clear move *toward* the Christians it addressed, as an honest attempt to find common ground rather than lure Christians onto Islamic turf, revealed clearly the peace-building approach of the initiative.

Although numerous Christian individuals and organizations from around the world received the Muslim document with enthusiasm, "anti-dialogue evangelicals" perceived it as a Muslim deception, a ploy to dismantle the mission enterprise. Accordingly, the significant Yale evangelical response, "Loving God and Neighbor Together," officially published in a full-page ad of the New York Times on November 18, 2007,[7] was also viewed as emerging out of ignorance, from Christian leadership lacking a perceptive understanding of Islam's essential expansionist nature. As one of the 300 original signatories who endorsed the Yale response, I have received numerous emails from evangelical friends wondering how I could have missed the "obvious trap." As signatories, all of us were also served in recent months another booklet entitled, *The Common Word: the Undermining of the Church*. It was accompanied by a personal note to the evangelical signatories of the Yale response, once again appealing to us to rescind our endorsement. It is dedicated "to the converts from Islam," appealing to them not to "lose heart because of those who have trivialized that incomparable love through their acceptance of a commonality you know all too well to be a well-crafted illusion."[8]

What emerges, then, from these recent developments among evangelicals, is that the basic stance of those who argue for the legitimacy of dialogue proceeds from a more positive vision of Islam, or what one might call an *Islam-friendly* approach. Those who staunchly reject the legitimacy of dialogue, on the other hand, may be described as being more *Islam-antagonistic*. It would appear that these judgments are more instinctive and experiential than carefully thought out. Those evangelicals who either have had bad experiences with Muslims, or who are influenced by those who have had bad experiences, have developed an antagonistic and negative attitude and approach to Islam. Those, on the other hand, who have had positive encounters with

> *Both types of Christians from the East seem to embrace a stance toward Islam largely out of fear.*

Muslims, along with those influenced by these more positive evangelicals, have a more friendly attitude and approach to Islam.

At this point it appears that evangelicals are still primarily reactionary and experiential in their attitude to Islam and Muslims. In other words, these attitudes do not seem to derive from a comprehensive historical, theological, and liturgical reflection and analysis of Islam's nature. There have certainly been some harsh condemnations of Islam since 9/11 that have demonized it in its entirety. But I do not believe there has been any serious attempt at developing a proper Christian theology of Islam that does justice to the

multiple dimensions and diverse manifestations of its religious world.[9]

I believe it is also this non-theological, experience-based approach to Islam that has evangelicals divided into two distinct and fairly antagonistic camps with regard to contextualization and the emergence of what are commonly called "Insider Movements." How can one accept that it is possible for a Muslim to become a follower of Jesus while maintaining a positive, even a ritualistically-engaged, presence in their original Muslim milieu, if one believes that Islam is demonic in its origins, its founding texts, and its history? On the other hand, those who perceive a substantial historical and theological continuity between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, and for whom both Islam's founding texts and its ritualistic practices contain much that is aligned with that tradition, are much more inclined to accept greater continuity between a follower of Jesus and their Muslim past.

Sookhdeo points out in his 2010 survey that policies of non-proselytism have been adopted at various points by Anglicans, Catholics, and the World Council of Churches, as a prerequisite to Christian-Muslim dialogue. *Proselytism* is often used as the dirty word in the discussion, as opposed to other softer words like *witness*. There are indeed those Christians who have preferred to distance themselves from evangelism, often as the result of a very negative historical interpretation of Christian mission, where coercive conversion is understood to have been the rule of the day. The very idea of mission and missionaries has conjured in some people's minds (both Christian and Muslim) images of white colonial powers forcing colored indigenous peoples to give up their ancestral ways and adopt both the cultural and religious traditions of their new masters.

This common perception of proselytism is one of the unfortunate

consequences of what I see in the intersection of Religion and Empire. Consider, for example, Emerito Nacpil's description of mission, given during a consultation in Kuala Lumpur in February 1971, as "a symbol of the universality of Western imperialism among the rising generations of the Third World."[10] He concluded: "The present structure of modern mission is dead. And the first thing we ought to do is to eulogize it and then bury it." He advises that "the most *missionary* service a missionary under the present system can do today to Asia is to go home!" He represents a common tendency to reinterpret evangelical motivations through the lens of Empire.

Evangelicals have chosen to respond to this global sensitivity quite differently. If we return for a moment to Sabra's typology, it might be insightful to extend his two types to the current mission orientations within evangelicalism. The more *dialogue-oriented* approach to Islam may be identifiable with the Arab Christian type, whereas the more *evangelism-oriented* approach may be aligned with the Eastern Christian type. The concern to blend in motivates for dialogue and the search for common ground, whereas the concern for distinctiveness, strengthened by a sense of belonging to a global Christian majority, motivates for evangelism and conversion from one to another distinct reality.

Although these two orientations represent a natural phenomenon emerging out of the two historical types, I want to venture my concern for what this represents in the evangelical world today. The fanatical endorsement of the one orientation, accompanied with the categorical—sometimes violent—rejection of the other, verges on serious personality disorder, perhaps even a kind of spiritual psychosis. Some indeed have become the object of vicious attacks because of their endorsement of the dialogical approach. This observation should not be understood as an

I am sometimes told by Muslims that all form of missionary activity should be stopped because it causes conflict between communities.

absolute defense of dialogue. As will be pointed out in the next section, evangelicalism with no evangelism ceases to be evangelical at all. At the same time, particularly in light of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Christianity without dialogue that works for peace is no Christianity at all. I'm simply suggesting that the either/or perspective leads to a kind of dualism that is missiologically highly problematic and unhealthy.

We need to avoid the dualism that would regard dialogue as the Kingdom-approach to mission, whereas evangelism would be the Church-approach to mission. I would argue that we do not have to choose between Church and Kingdom, because the New Testament tells us that the Church is the earthly manifestation of the Kingdom, and that the Kingdom of God, while already here through the Church, is not yet fulfilled until the parousia. The belief that we need to choose between Church and Kingdom suggests a confusion that would identify Church with Religion and Kingdom with Empire. Once this confusion has occurred, the act of converting to Christ begins tacitly to imply becoming a member of the new religion of Christianity in a socio-political sense, contributing to the growth of the empire that has sometimes been referred to as "Christendom." I am not suggesting that those evangelicals who oppose the new type of evangelical dialogue today are consciously endorsing such a worldview, but in effect that is what their position would seem to amount to.

Christian-Muslim Dialogue from Conversion to New Birth in Christ

I am sometimes told by Muslims, with whom I dialogue on public panels, that all form of missionary activity should be stopped because it creates conflict between communities and does

not reflect tolerance of other faiths. In addition, they say it could lead to conversion. My response, however, is that in this case we should stop any kind of further conversation together. At a 2010 dialogue conference in Toronto, I put forth the following challenge: "What if, in conversation with a Muslim friend, I was so impressed and seduced by the beauty of his discourse that I chose to convert to Islam? Would that delegitimize our conversation? Would I have to be prevented from becoming a Muslim?" I suggested that I didn't believe this would be fair either to him or to me, or to either of the two religions. Dialogue, for evangelicals, should not so much be an alternative to evangelism that may lead to conversion. Rather, it should motivate us to revisit our understanding of these concepts of mission, evangelism, and conversion in light of our Scriptures.

The New Testament Concept of Conversion

We come across several words in the New Testament that express the concept of conversion. Let us identify the principal ones, do a bit of a word study, and then summarize our findings. Any standard Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, such as Bauer and Danker's, or Grimm's, will provide definitions along the lines below:

1. *προσηλυτον (proselyton)* (Matt. 23:15; Acts 2:11; Acts 6:5; Acts 13:43): refers specifically to a Gentile convert to Judaism. This was a special category of non-ethnic Jews that subscribed to various levels of adherence to the Mosaic Law.
2. *νεοφυτον (neophyton)* (1 Tim. 3:6): occurs only once, where the apostle Paul

recommends that leaders in the church should not be individuals who have recently joined the church (usually translated as "convert").

3. απαρχη *(aparkhi)* (Rom. 8:23; Rom. 11:16; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20, 15:23, 16:15; 2 Thess. 2:13; James 1:18; Rev. 14:4): This can refer ritualistically to the first portion of any produce, which was set aside for God, according to the Mosaic Law, before the rest could lawfully be used. It can refer to the first manifestation of something to be followed by similar manifestations. And it can also mean a foretaste or pledge for something greater to come, like a down-payment (see also αρραβων, which recalls the word عربون ʿ*arbūn* in Arabic). In a couple of NT passages (Rom. 16:5 and 1 Cor. 16:15), the term is translated as "first convert," but it is in the context of Paul referring to a first person or household in a town that embraces the message that he was preaching.

4. μετανοια *(metanoia)* (Matt. 3:11; Luke 5:32; Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31; and numerous other places): usually translated as "repentance."

5. επιστρεφω *(epistrepho)* (Matt. 13:15; Matt. 18:3; Mark 4:12; Luke 22:32; John 12:40; Acts 3:19; Acts 15:3; Acts 28:27): can mean anything from turning around or returning to a place physically, to turning away from sin, to experiencing an internal change of heart, to turning (back) to God. There is no suggestion of turning from one religion to another in the passages that use this verb.

Several of the Greek words that are used in the New Testament with reference to the concept of "conversion"

are rendered in English translations of the NT with the word "convert." The word most immediately referring to a religious conversion is *proselyton*, which occurs in the English language as *proselyte*, as well as in the act of *proselytism*. This has almost become a dirty word in the English language today and certainly is not a popular one in dialogue circles. However, in the NT, the verb occurs exclusively as a reference to Gentile converts to Judaism, never to indicate a person that has endorsed the gospel message of Jesus, nor even a member of churches established later by the apostles.

Perhaps the closest term semantically to this first one is the word *neophyton*, which refers to someone

There is no concept of interreligious conversion in the New Testament.
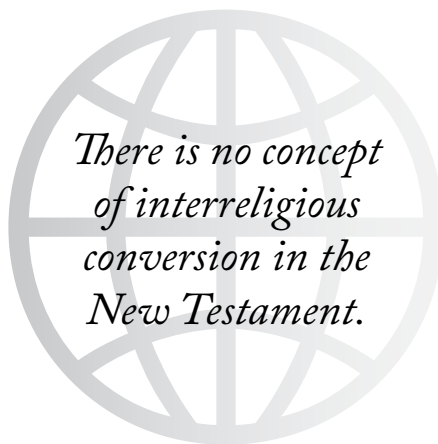
who has joined a church established by Paul. This term originally belonged to the world of agriculture, meaning a newly-planted tree. But it occurs only once in the NT (1 Tim. 3:6). Here Paul is giving recommendations regarding the choice of leadership for the community of believers—this should not be someone who has *recently* come to believe in Christ, a *neophyton*.

The third term that is translated "convert" in two NT passages (at least in the NIV translation) is *aparkhi*. The word actually means "first fruit" and comes from Jewish ritualistic language. Paul uses the term a couple of times to refer to the first person that becomes

a follower of Jesus in a certain town or region. The other two terms, *metanoia* and *epistrepho*, are semantically close in meaning. They refer respectively to the idea of *repenting* and *turning away* from a previous way of doing things.

In summary, there is no concept of *interreligious* conversion in the NT when it comes to turning from any worldview and embracing the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is never suggested that a Jew should reject Judaism and adopt some alternative religious way when they come to accept Jesus' claims about himself (a reference to "Christianity" would be an anachronism). The NT focus is on repentance, not from some religious affiliation but from certain attitudes, behaviors, and ways of thinking. It invites people to be so transformed from their previous ways that Jesus refers to this transformation as a *new birth*! Jesus' gospel invites the repentant to turn to God by accepting the claims that Jesus made about himself and about God. The NT epistles, written by Christ's apostles to early communities that had become Christ-followers, describe that status as someone being εν Χριστω *(en Khristo)*, in Christ.

An Evangelical Understanding of "New Birth" and of Being "in Christ"

The key passage for us to understand the concept of *new birth* in the NT is found in the words of Jesus, in chapter 3 of John's Gospel. The chapter describes a secret encounter between Jesus and a prominent Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus. Nicodemus expresses much respect for Jesus and acknowledges that he has come "from God" (John 3:2). To this Jesus responds that being from God is not something inherited from one's ancestors. In other words, Jesus was affirming that the fact that he had come from God had nothing to do with his Jewish ethnic belonging. And he invites him to rise above his religious identity with the following

words: "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). He invites him to embrace an alternative identity by pointing him to a higher and deeper spiritual principle than ethnic belonging: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). And he warns him that God's Spirit moves right across the safe boundaries of our religious institutions: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Elsewhere in my teaching and writing, I derive from this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus the suggestion that Jesus possessed a *supra-religious* view of reality and of religions.[11]

The apostle Peter, in the opening chapter of his first epistle, writing to a Jewish audience, clearly has well understood his master's worldview as he criticizes "the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers" (1 Pet. 1:18). Instead, he affirms to his audience: "[Y]ou have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

Elsewhere in the NT, the apostle Paul expresses this idea of new spiritual birth through the seed of Christ rather than of physical birth through the seed of Abraham; it is simply through the concept of being "in Christ" (*εν Χριστω* [*en Khristo*]). He summarizes the concept in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" In Galatians 6.15, Paul follows completely in the supra-religious thinking of his master through his affirmation: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." And finally, being *in Christ* is crowned by the amazing promise in Romans 8:1: "[T]here is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (NIV). Paul

They usually prefer to think of themselves as development workers, peacemakers, or NGO personnel, rather than missionaries.

expands extensively on the idea of being a new creation in Christ by using the metaphor of adoption (*υιοθεσια* [*uiothesia*]). "In love," Paul affirms, God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:5). Paul describes the status of being without Christ as being "in slavery under the basic principles of the world" (Gal. 4:3). "But when the time had fully come," he asserts, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal. 4:4–5). The word translated as "sons" in this verse is the same *υιοθεσιαν (uiothesian)*.

This verse is important for Christian-Muslim dialogue, for it sets Jesus' title of *Son of God* in its proper hermeneutical context: because we are God's slaves outside of Christ, God invites us, by being *in Christ*, to become ourselves sons and daughters of God. Paul continues in verse 6: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Gal. 4:6). Here the metaphors of "being born again," "adopted" as "new creations," and "in Christ" all come together. They all point to God's initiative, in Christ, whose ultimate purpose is to draw us into a relationship of intimacy with Himself as heavenly Father, as normal children may have intimacy with their earthly father.

The Kerygmatic Approach and the Supra-Religious Starting Point

I believe we are living in a new era of evangelical mission. In the past, we were told that we had to choose between evangelism and dialogue. Evangelism was the signature of evangelical mission work. Dialogue,

we were led to believe, was the task of liberal Christians who have diluted the gospel. The emergence of a new generation of missionaries in a post-modern, post-Christian, should we say post-Christendom era forces us—whether we like it or not—to abandon any dichotomy. An emerging generation of missionaries (who usually prefer to think of themselves as development workers, peacemakers, or NGO personnel, rather than missionaries) is giving up on any fake missionary "platform." During the final two decades of the twentieth century a so-called platform was often used as a pretense to gain a residency permit in closed-access countries, often with no substantial work on the ground to justify it. The emerging generation of Christ-following missionaries is abandoning such pretense for real and legitimate platforms, actual jobs, where they can live out the Kingdom of God as global Christians, rather than as Western Christians going out to the world to "save the heathen."

In this new way of thinking, the evangelical approach to interfaith dialogue is by definition *missional*. There is no option of putting gospel proclamation on standby for the sake of dialogue. The moment dialogue becomes for us an *alternative* rather than a *complement* to the proclamation of the gospel, we cease to be evangelical, at least according to the widely accepted definition of the term. Despite the fact that there is no single definition for "evangelical" (since evangelicalism has never known a centralized representative authority), prominent evangelical leaders and historians have described its central characteristics. John Stott, J. I. Packer, and Alister McGrath agree on at least six common evangelical characteristics: (1) The supremacy

of Holy Scripture, (2) the majesty of Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death, (3) the lordship of the Holy Spirit, (4) the necessity of conversion, (5) the priority of evangelism, and (6) the importance of fellowship.[12] Bebbington focuses on four characteristics that are held in common: (1) the centrality of conversion, (2) the importance of activism, (3) the importance of the Bible, and (4) the centrality of the cross.[13] These definitions still stand. What characterizes us as evangelicals, beyond the central tenets of Christian doctrine, is our holding to the centrality of the Bible, the cross, evangelism, and conversion, adding as well the importance of fellowship and the Holy Spirit's lordship over the community of believers. Most important is the fact that some form of faith-witness has always been a foundational distinctive of evangelicalism.

Evangelicals certainly did not learn interfaith dialogue in 2007 as a result of the Yale Response to the Common Word. And for all the historic, indeed history-making, nature of that highly publicized exchange, many well-respected evangelical leaders were engaged in courteous dialogue with Muslims long before. One of the very first dialogues between conservative evangelicals and Muslims in Lebanon began as early as 2003, as part of a course on Islam in Beirut. In fact, it was aborted about a week before the original event, as a result of the displeasure of one particular pastor. But every year since then, our Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary has organized a Middle East Conference with a focus on Islam and the Church's responsibility to be a witness in the Muslim world. Each year, during that week, we have brought Christians and Muslims together in the evening to interact in a dialogue forum. The motivation and purpose of our annual conference is decidedly and unapologetically missional, passionately dialogical, and holistically

transformational, both for us and for our Muslim partners in dialogue. The misunderstandings emerging in certain evangelical circles of the Middle East as a result of the dialogue initiatives of our Institute of Middle East Studies have had a particular benefit: they have forced us to reflect on our activities and to develop theoretical frameworks to help our understanding.

Having been the object of several personal attacks by evangelical pastors as a result of my approach to Islam (which was deemed unacceptably friendly and courteous), I developed in 2004–2005 a dialogical spectrum that identified five positions within an infinite continuum of relational possibilities between a Christian and a Muslim. I called it the "SEKAP Spectrum

It is quite easy to shoot "polemical arrows" at Islam while writing under a pseudonym.
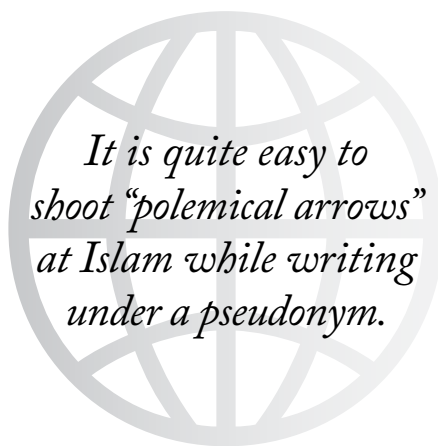
of Christian-Muslim Interaction," with SEKAP being an acrostic for the distinct orientations: Syncretistic, Existential, Kerygmatic, Apologetic, and Polemical.[14]

Where would Sabra's types fall on this SEKAP spectrum? His Arab Christian type leans toward the syncretistic/existential (SE) attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims, whereas the Eastern Christian type is inclined to adopt the apologetic/polemical (AP) attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims. Over the past few years, I have spent much time and energy exploring and experimenting with the theoretical and practical implications of the *kerygmatic* (K) attitude and

approach in my ministry and interaction with Muslims, one I believe that honors, uses, and integrates the entire SEPAK spectrum in a balanced missional personality.

The learning process is, of course, ongoing and I'm learning and growing at a personal level through my relationships with Muslims. And at the same time, there is also a corporate growing taking place, as my colleagues and I continue to explore and push the boundaries of relationship with Muslims in the context of the Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon. In conclusion to the present paper, I would like to share a couple of points that we have learned in the process. They are some of the core elements of what I would call the *kerygmatic* attitude and approach to Islam and Muslims. They constitute, in my view, important characteristics of a balanced missional personality in today's world realities.

Transparency and Humility

There is many an approach to Islam today in the global evangelical world that is completely useless to those of us who have a calling and passion to live and serve among Muslims *in* the Muslim world. It is quite easy to shoot "polemical arrows" at Islam while writing under a pseudonym, chatting anonymously in internet chat rooms and forums, or even speaking through a television or radio broadcasting microphone, especially if you are sitting in a library or studio in California, Spain, France, or England. It is quite a different matter to do so and continue to live and serve in the Muslim world. Some missionaries have learned this the hard way and finally developed a concept they refer to as "3D" communication. In a word, considering the closely interconnected world we live in, whenever they say or teach anything about Islam, they speak with awareness that they may well have at least three simultaneous audiences: the

Christian community, the media, and the world at large.

This reality is one to which those of us who have grown up in a country within the Muslim world are intuitively attuned. But far from being a "strategy" for mission and evangelism, or even one borne out of an instinct for self-preservation, for us it falls within the category of integrity, an antonym to "bearing false witness." We learn to speak fairly, avoiding rash generalizations, because we have experienced Muslims as human beings, with as much diversity within the group as there are colors among the fish of the sea. I, for one, have of course not always succeeded in living up to such integrity. But when I fail, I have learned to call it what it is—the sin of bearing false witness. When I hear endless slander of Islam in some of our evangelical (even missionary) circles, my heart bleeds with sadness, for suddenly we can slip into the pathology of the Eastern Christian type where it borders on psychosis.

As an Arab Christian (and this time I am not referring to the "type"), I also have to come to terms with my evangelical, my Protestant, and, whether I like it or not, my American heritage. For indeed most of the Protestant community of Lebanon is the fruit of American missionary labor. In today's global world, that connection frankly does not bother me at a personal level (everyone is bound, after all, to go to McDonald's or Starbucks from time to time!) However, in my Arab context, both local evangelicals and foreign missionaries are judged through people's experience of America's role in the world. And sadly, when economics replaced principled morality during the Arab Spring; when national self-interest and narrow foreign policy interest trumps social justice in the case of the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN; when democracy and freedom continue to be preached to the drumbeat of F-16's in Iraq and Afghanistan; then we

I learned early in my journey of dialogue with Muslims that most Muslims appreciate clarity and honesty about your agenda.

evangelicals, both locals and missionaries, had better develop and adopt a politics of humility in our approach to Islam. Fancy that we level a blanket accusation of violence and brutality against Islam when the world has access to the records of an endemically violent colonial history in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and indeed in North America itself toward its native population—and oh-so-often in the name of Christianity, and with such "solid" Biblical support. With such a record in recent history, there is no need even to mention the more distant past of the Crusades or the Reconquista. The absurd reality that such sin exists among us should make us humble enough to acknowledge that there may be more than one brand of Islam within Islam, beyond the one that manifests itself in murderous violence. Appreciating this diversity is key to moving us out of fear and into genuine relationships that can lead to transformation.

Furthermore, transparency is not only about integrity of discourse, but also about being candid regarding your agenda and objectives. I learned early in my journey of dialogue with Muslims that most Muslims appreciate clarity and honesty about your agenda and that they would much rather engage in conversation with persons who have a seriousness about their faith that leads them to passionate evangelism, than with those who claim to be what they are not and say what they assume their Muslim interlocutor wants to hear.

In my relationship with Muslim leaders, I am quite candid about the fact that as an evangelical working at a Baptist seminary, I belong to a tradition that is strong on evangelism and conversion. I am clear that I am just as keen for the opportunity to present them with a balanced and attractive

discourse about Jesus as they are for an opportunity to present me with an attractive discourse about Islam. I am adamant about demonstrating practically to them all the respect, admiration, and love that I deeply feel for them. I joke with them about their need to be patient with us when they come to us for dialogue and interaction, as they are likely to hear many stereotypes about Islam and are at risk of coming under direct attack. They usually assure me that I am likely to experience the same among them!

Personal Transformation

This attitude of transparency, humility, and openness in my interaction with Muslims has taken me on a journey of personal transformation. As I have wrestled to find ways to express the gospel plainly and without the usual Church jargon, and as I have strived to overcome my own prejudice and apprehension toward Islam, I have been transformed in my own understanding of God, Christ, the Church, mission, and religion generally.

The starting point has been what I now call my "religious worldview." I have discovered that even though the Protestant Reformation emerged in reaction to the often lethal institutionalization of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, and despite its profound critique of the burden of a tradition that came to supplant the primacy of Scripture and God's grace, we ourselves also quickly become thoroughly institutionalized. We may pay lip service to the idea that we *only* preach Christ, not Christianity. But in reality, through our church life, in our personal lifestyle, and in the message that we preach, it is obvious that we love the cliquish comfort of our often sterilized club-like church meetings, and it is clear that

there are few things we would love more than for the rest of the world to align with our expectations and norms. In a word, we would love for everyone to live and breathe within the boundaries of our own comfort zone.

However, the more I read about Jesus' life and work, and the more I read his teaching and parables, the more I become convinced that his message had little to do with creating a religious alternative to Judaism. Jesus kept pushing the boundaries of accepted social and religious conventions. He kept the common doors of religious exclusivism flung wide open, in a way that allowed him to embrace the alienated and marginalized. His pet peeve was the religious leaders, the self-appointed guardians of access to God. And he continually sought to realign priorities, when religious symbols and institutions such as the Sabbath or temple were twisted to enslave rather than liberate the religious community. From the four Gospels emerges a picture of Jesus who, despite embracing his Jewish religious tradition as an inherent part of his socio-cultural identity and religious heritage, was nevertheless not limited by that tradition. He was clearly at peace with his Jewishness, but by no means did it encapsulate the nature or manner of his relationship with God to whom he referred as Father. Neither would he have initiated an alternative religious institution such as Christianity to replace the old.

Furthermore, it is clear from the apostle Paul's stance on circumcision that he fully understood the implication of Jesus' attitude, teaching, and behavior toward religion. His invitation to the Gentiles to be "in Christ" (*en Xristo*) sought to bypass this central Jewish institution. Our attempt to follow in these footsteps should provoke us to reject the primacy of religion in our evangelistic message. As the evangelical adage goes: "We preach Christ, not Christianity." It remains for us to really believe this and actually practice what we preach.

In my personal practice, this realization has completely transformed my starting point in dialogue with Muslims. I no longer feel that I am in competition with them. I feel no need to attack or destroy their institution of Islam (for indeed Muslims define Islam as an institution) in order to replace it with some rival structure called Christianity. I am happy instead to explore with them the implication of Jesus' life and teaching on their reality, whatever their professed socio-religious identity.

Conclusion: A Holistic and Transformational View of Mission

The realization that Islam touches on every dimension of life and reality, that it is more than a set of religious

> *I feel no need to attack or destroy their institution of Islam.*
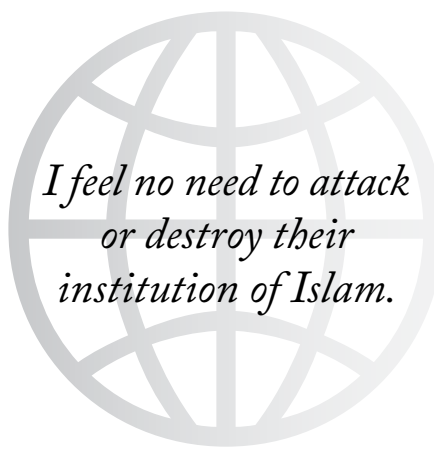
propositions needing to be dismantled, leads us to recognize that presenting an alternative set of Christian propositions is inadequate as the sole vehicle of the Church's mission. Its redemption requires a holistic missional enterprise.

Ironically, the mainline missionary efforts during the nineteenth century, for all of their many flaws, managed to transform Muslim societies and cultures far more profoundly than the more conservative evangelical efforts of the twentieth century, which consisted mainly of oral proclamation. It was the Presbyterian missionary efforts in nineteenth

century Beirut, which established transforming initiatives such as the Syrian Protestant College (now the American University of Beirut), that have arguably had the greatest influence in shaping the socio-cultural makeup of Lebanon as we know it today. I believe, for instance, that it was the deep social impact of this extensive liberal arts education, which has been pervasive in Lebanese society for now over 150 years, that has spared Lebanon from needing to experience its own "Arab Spring." Since its independence in 1943, Lebanon—unlike most neighboring countries—has had no dictatorship, and therefore no autocratic ruler to overthrow. The Lebanese population would not tolerate dictatorship because it is profoundly steeped in the values of liberty and freedom of thought and choice. There is no doubt that Protestant institutions like the American University of Beirut have had a key role in instilling these values in Lebanese society.

It is unfortunate that the more conservative evangelical missionary enterprise of the twentieth century gave up this more holistic approach to mission. Today, however, in the twenty-first century, we are able to learn from the mistakes of both the more liberal enterprise of nineteenth-century mission as well as the more conservative one of the twentieth. A reflection on mission at the intersection of Church and Kingdom should catalyze such an analysis to draw lessons from both historical experiences.

Finally, I do hope this present paper starts us toward a twenty-first-century missiology that helps the emerging generation of evangelical workers in God's harvest to come to terms with both the theological and political dimensions of our missionary past. A younger missionary enterprise stands at the contemporary intersection of Religion and Empire. The marriage of Mission with Empire has proved catastrophic in the history of the Church's mission in the world. It is startling

that we can still miss this point even today. In the post-Iraq-war era, mission agencies continue to perpetuate the mistakes of the colonial era (missionaries, quite frankly, have walked into the country alongside the soldiers without seeing the implications for mission). And, even more pressing theologically—and I believe this is the greatest current challenge within evangelical mission—the marriage of Mission with Religion continues to prove ineffective, and indeed I believe, unfaithful to the gospel of Christ. Any reflection on mission at the intersection of Religion and Empire should challenge us to embrace a missionary task that is both supra-religious and thoroughly Christ-centered. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] "Baptist Leaders Reflect Morally on Killing of Osama bin Laden," Ethics Daily, May 2, 2011, accessed October 31, 2011, http://www.ethicsdaily.com/baptist-leaders-reflect-morally-on-killing-of-osama-bin-laden-cms-17840.

[2] George Sabra. "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17 (January 2006): 43–53.

[3] Sabra, "Two Ways," 45.

[4] Sabra, "Two Ways," 44.

[5] The paper is available on the website of the Barnabas Fund, which was founded and is directed by Patrick Sookhdeo, "Recent Changes in Christian Approaches to Islam," 8 March 2010, accessed 4 November 2011, http://barnabasfund.org/US/News/Archives/Recent-Changes-in-Christian-Approaches-to-Islam.html.

[6] For a record of the initiative and the many responses to it, see the various materials found on www.acommonword.com.

[7] This can now be viewed at http://acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf.

[8] From the opening dedication of the booklet, *The Common Word: the Undermining of the Church*.

[9] A notable recent exception, which actually goes into a fairly extensive and comprehensive analysis of the Muslim view of God is Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (HarperOne: 2011).

[10] Nacpil, Emerito, "Whom Does the Missionary Serve and What Does He Do?" in *Missionary Service in Asia Today* (Hong Kong: 1971).

[11] See for example my article (jointly written with John Corrie) on the "Trinity" in the *IVP Dictionary of Mission Theology* (IVP: 2007), or my forthcoming chapter "Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach," in Evelyne Reisacher (ed.), *Thinking Christianly about Islam and Muslims, A Festschrift for Dudley Woodberry* (forthcoming).

[12] Packer, *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* (Oxford: 1978); McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Hodder and Stoughton: 1994); both cited in Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (IVP: 1999), 27.

[13] D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman: 1989).

[14] The SEKAP Spectrum is forthcoming in a Festschrift to Dudley Woodberry, as part of a chapter entitled: "Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach."