Muhammad

October–December 2014

31:4

William Carey Library

Slippery Paths in the Darkness
Papers on Syncretism: 1965–1988

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor

Alan Tippett's publications played a significant role in the development of missiology. The volumes in this series augment his distinguished reputation by bringing to light his many unpublished materials and hard-to-locate printed articles. These books—encompassing theology, anthropology, history, area studies, religion, and ethnohistory—broaden the contours of the discipline.

A primary concern among missiologists is how to present the gospel in a way that is culturally relevant without adulterating the essential truths of the message. The ability to appropriately contextualize this message is the difference between establishing an indigenous Christianity as opposed to introducing syncretism. In this compendium of presentations and papers, the issue is addressed with regard to the idea of covenant relationship with the Lord.

List Price $18.⁹⁹ • **Our Price $15.¹⁹**

The Fullness of Time
Ethnohistory Selections from the Writings of Alan R. Tippett

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor

Alan Tippett believed his writings on ethnohistory were his most original contribution to the discipline of missiology. The wealth of material in *Fullness of Time* is his best ethnohistory writing, most of which has never been published. Explore the methods and models of this captivating field of study. Realize how documents, oral tradition, and even artifacts can be used to recreate the cultural situation of a prior time. Learn about the South Pacific, Ethiopia, Hawaii, and Australia, both in and through time.

Alan Tippett's twenty years of missionary service in Fiji—preceded by pastoral ministry in Australia and graduate studies in history and anthropology—provide the rich data base that make him a leading missiologist of the twentieth century. Tippett served as Professor of Anthropology and Oceanic Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary.

List Price $35.⁹⁵ • **Our Price $28.⁷⁵**

No Continuing City
The Story of a Missiologist from Colonial to Postcolonial Times

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor
Charles Kraft, Editor

As a gift to his wife, Edna, and their children on the occasion of their golden wedding anniversary, Alan Tippett completed his autobiography just months prior to his death. Containing personal reflections found in no other publication, *No Continuing City* is the inside story of Tippett's childhood, his later mission experiences in the South Pacific, his relationship with Donald McGavran and the founding of the School of World Mission, and his retirement in Australia.

Editors Charles Kraft and Doug Priest both knew Alan Tippett personally. Charles Kraft is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Fuller Seminary and was a colleague of Tippett from 1969 to 1977. Doug Priest is executive director of CMF International. While at Fuller Seminary, Priest was a student of Tippett as well as his assistant.

List Price $39.⁹⁹ • **Our Price $31.⁹⁹**

From the Editor's Desk

The Shifting Significance of Muhammad

I t can be quite a shock for Christians to realize what the Prophet Muhammad really means to a Muslim. I can recall the first time I heard about the "toothpick of Muhammad." How strange, I thought, that the purity of fasting during Ramadan could be reduced to how Muhammad had dealt with the food between his teeth.

That Muslims everywhere cherish his role as the bearer of Qur'anic revelation is not hard for us to understand; it's grasping the particularities of Muhammad as a "lived reality" that can be mind-boggling for most Christians—especially when we know so little about our own Old Testament prophets by comparison. And while we're familiar with the call to follow Jesus as found in the biblical narratives, the way in which the Islamic tradition *(hadith* and *sunnah)* transmits a labyrinth of episodes and anecdotes about Muhammad's character and action is a "prophetology" of a whole other type. Indeed, Muhammad's biography is perceived as the very substance of God's activity, a living presence. Listen to al-Ghazali:

> Know that the key to happiness is to follow the sunna and to imitate the Messenger of God in all his coming and going, his movements and rest, in his way of eating, his attitude, his sleep and his talk… "What the messenger has brought—accept it, and what he has prohibited—refrain from it" (Sura 59:7). That means, you have to sit while putting on trousers, to stand when winding a turban, and to begin with the right foot when putting on shoes…[1]

This emphasis on the embodied presence of Muhammad's life has created a type of prophetic consciousness quite distinct from the more abstract theological bias of Western Christianity.

I have found over the years that the finest communicators of the gospel to Muslims, though not explicit about Muhammad, usually have a good fix on what he might mean to a Muslim. They're sensitive to his psychological, cultural and ideological grip on a mind and heart. What does Muhammad mean to them? What is his significance? Muslims may respond to Muhammad in myriad ways, yet at the base is a common prophetological mindset that prioritizes him as *uswa hasana,* "the beautiful model" (Surah 33:21).

In his article, Harley Talman has resisted our typical categorical treatment of Muhammad by exploring recent scholarship that re-examines the traditional Islamic understanding of the Prophet (his bibliography is an incredible starting

---

The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology or the society's executive committee.

place for the budding scholar). But in a self-reflective exercise, he also helps us examine the assumptions behind our own Christian prophetology (p. 169). Talman is courageously trying to open a new conversation on the prophet Muhammad, and Martin Accad believes it warrants a new mandate for evangelical mission (p. 191).

Perry Pennington broadens the way we interpret the prophetology of a Muslim with his study of South Asian folk Islam (p. 195). The river of Islam has flowed over many a cultural landscape throughout history, and the primal spirituality of indigenous peoples has often blended into the rituals of Islamic faith. Over the centuries, this syncretistic consciousness has flourished in a greater veneration of the Prophet, in the seeking of blessing from his relics, and in the emergence of large unorthodox brotherhoods that have claimed a unique *baraka* (power) from his lineage. (When it comes to sorting through this level of religious syncretism, don't miss the new release of Alan Tippett's *Slippery Paths in the Darkness*, p. 166.)

Islamic fundamentalism arose as a modern rejection of this folk Islamic stream, so today we witness a more ideological use of Muhammad by jihadists. The brutal territorial grab of the Islamic State presently demands the world's attention (p. 218), but one journalist notes a clear prophetological refrain in their propaganda. ISIS militants smash antiquities as "a chance to re-enact the life of the Prophet," and they remind the world that the Prophet Muhammad "removed and destroyed idols with his own exalted and noble hands when he conquered Mecca."[2] This radical emulation of Muhammad assaults our modern sensibilities, but it also distracts us from seeing the manifold ways in which our own Westernization is reviving Muhammad in the lives of individual Muslims. H. L. Richard would suggest we moderns can't see this variety of religiosities because of our own "enlightened" view of religion (p. 209).

The articles in this issue of the *IJFM* make a case for a more perceptive prophetology, one that discerns the place of Muhammad in our communication of the gospel.[3] It was actually the Apostle Paul who perceived the weight of prophetic awareness when he said "at the reading of Moses a veil lies over their heart" (II Cor. 3:15). As with Moses, so with Muhammad, for any prophetology can cover a mind and prevent it from turning to the Lord. Such has been the case with Muslims for fourteen centuries. But then maybe you've heard of the pervasive dreams of Jesus that are penetrating Muslim consciousness today, or of the open hearts of those refugees fleeing the crisis of a brutal Islam. Indeed, the significance of Muhammad is shifting, and the veil is lifting.

In Him,

Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes
[1] From chapter 20 of al-Ghazali's *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din,* cited in Lamin Sanneh's excellent article, "Muhammad's Significance for Christians," in Stackhouse, et al, *The Local Church in a Global Era* (Eerdmans, 2000).

[2] David Pinault, "The Allure of the Islamic State Vandals," *Wall Street Journal,* March 7–8 2015, p. A9.

[3] An example is found at http://jaq.org.

Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets?

by Harley Talman

Harley Talman has worked with Muslims for 30 years, including two decades in the Arab world and Africa, during which he was involved in church planting, theological education, and humanitarian aid. Talman holds a ThM from Dallas Seminary and a PhD from Fuller. He presently teaches Islamic studies.

T he prophet Samuel had anointed Saul as king and predicted that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon him with power so that he would prophesy and be changed into a different person (1 Sam 10:6). And thus it happened that "God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day" and he prophesied (10:9,11). This was the last thing that people expected to happen to the "son of Kish." As a result, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" became a proverb in Israel.[1] The same Spirit later empowered him to defeat the Ammonites in battle (11:6).

Yet this same Saul disobeyed God's word and failed in his kingly office. It seems incredible that one endowed with the Spirit of God could act so contrary to his will. God eventually rejected him as king, and withdrew his Spirit from him (16:1, 14). Saul persecuted David and repeatedly sought to kill him. The way that Saul's life finished is so tragic that it dominates our memory of him; we forget that he had once been "among the prophets."

However, in recent years some biblical scholars have sought to restore balance to our corporate memory of Saul. Seeking to rehabilitate his image, Ron Youngblood finds that despite his failings, Saul could also be "kind, thoughtful, generous, courageous, very much in control, and willing to obey God."[2]

Is it advisable that Christians consider undertaking a similar project with the prophet of Islam? Can the malevolent image of Muhammad in our minds possibly be "rehabilitated"? As surprising as the idea may be, it is worth contemplating, since one of the most delicate issues we face in seeking constructive dialogue with Muslims is our response to the question: "Is Muhammad also among the prophets?"

This question has also become a very controversial issue within the body of Christ. Disciples of Jesus have strong feelings and hold diverse and contrary convictions about their answer. While the majority of Christians would answer

"absolutely not," some are more tentative or affirming. Many Muslim followers of Christ would answer in the negative, but others may continue to affirm both halves of the Islamic *shahadah:* "There is no god but God *and* Muhammad is the *rasul* (messenger) of God"—albeit with a wide range of meanings.[3] Many Christians are strongly opposed to any such practice. Perhaps it would be beneficial to reconsider this topic.

The complexity of this matter requires a lengthy treatment. This article will focus on a reconsideration of four issues: our understanding of Muhammad and Islam, our theology of revelation, the criteria for prophethood, and possibilities for a positive prophetic role for Muhammad.

I. Muhammad and Islam Reconsidered

Several years ago, I had a conversation with an Islamics professor. I told her of my difficult journey in seeking to understand and assess Muhammad, accurately, fairly, and biblically. She confessed that none of the great Islamicists knew quite "where to land" with respect to Muhammad. Thus, I was not alone in this journey. I hope that after reading this article others will appreciate the reasons why this challenge has been so perplexing for so many.

Part of the problem lies in the binary categories of prophethood that have been used in relation to Muhammad. I hope that this article will serve to broaden our base of theological, historical and missiological understandings of prophethood in general and of the person of Muhammad in particular. While I do not expect immediate acceptance of my proposals, this study may enable readers to identify and question assumptions that underlie their convictions, stimulating renewed reflection and discussion.

Recognition of the Right Muhammad

Before beginning our quest to assess Muhammad we must ask what

may seem to be a rather ridiculous question: "Which 'Muhammad' are we talking about?" This is actually an important issue. It emerges from the difficulty of ascertaining the actual details of Muhammad's life due to the extreme lack of personal information about him in the Qur'an. Consequently, among scholars Muhammad has at least four different identities.

a. Muhammad according to Islamic tradition

The Qur'an and the diverse collections of the Hadith provide the basis for the Muhammad of Islamic tradition. This is the Muhammad that is most popularly known. However, the foundation for the popular Muhammad is questionable.

> *Some Muslim scholars admit that a portion of the words and actions attributed to Muhammad were fabricated.*
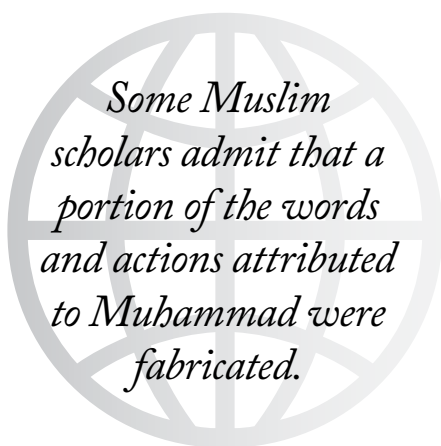
Some Muslim scholars admit that a portion of the purported words and actions attributed to Muhammad in various hadith were fabricated, e.g., his doing miracles identical to those performed by Jesus—especially since the Qur'an indicates that Muhammad did not perform miracles (cf. 2:118, 30:58). In addition, many of his biographical accounts *(sira)* were created long after his death and are of dubious reliability.[4] Critical scholars believe that a significant portion of the *sira* were fabricated to serve several purposes. The first was the need to provide context to aid in the interpretation of the Qur'anic revelations. Muslims far removed from the original context generated these stories in order to

explain the meaning of some baffling Qur'anic phrases. (In contrast, these Qur'anic phrases make much better sense if they are read in light of the biblical accounts). Second, there was the need for guidance in matters not addressed in the Qur'an which was supplied through the example *(sunnah)* of Muhammad's life. Furthermore, being disadvantaged in their debates with Christians, Muslims felt duty bound to magnify Muhammad's personage in order to compete with the biblical prophets and Jesus.[5] Andrew Rippin adds that this creative storytelling happened at a time when "the manifestation of the raconteur's ability to elaborate, entertain and enhance were highly praised merits."[6]

b. Muhammad of the Qur'an as interpreted by Muslim tradition

The Muhammad of the Qur'an is somewhat obscure. This is because many verses in the Qur'an lack sufficient context to clarify their meaning. Due to this, there are those who interpret the Qur'anic data through a lens shaped by the highly questionable Islamic traditions. These traditions portray the prophet of Islam as condemning of and hostile to Jews, Christians, the Bible, and Christian doctrine.[7]

c. Muhammad of the Qur'anists

Scholars, Muslim and Christian, who rely primarily on the internal evidence of the text of the Qur'an are cautious in their acceptance of other sources.[8] They view the Qur'an as a much more reliable historical source than Islamic tradition, but it is difficult to ascertain therein much personal information about Muhammad apart from his message. With this limitation, it is argued that the Qur'an affirms and authenticates the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Thus, many Qur'anists maintain that Muhammad's message should be interpreted in harmony with the previous Scriptures which it claimed to confirm, rather than rely on later traditions that contradict them.[9]

d. Muhammad of the revisionist historians

Applying higher critical methods to the study of Islam, revisionist scholars may reject almost anything attributed to or about Muhammad, including the Qur'an, unless it is corroborated by non-Islamic sources.[10] While many theories of the most radical revisionists are not widely accepted, their research does discredit the traditional and popular narrative at a number of points.

In the old TV show, "To Tell the Truth," after panel members tried to identify the described contestant from among imposters, the actual person was asked to stand up. Similarly, we would like to ask: "Will the real Muhammad please stand up?" Unfortunately, the real Muhammad is not among us to reveal himself. But the identity which one selects from the above Muhammads will also greatly influence one's view of Islam.

Revelation of the Original Islam

Much of what is considered today as representing "orthodox" Islam likely represents an understanding that developed two or three centuries after Muhammad. The most widely accepted version of Muhammad, based upon Islamic tradition, is dubious.

For example, Dan Gibson presents massive and multiple streams of evidence for the astonishing yet compelling proposal that the first holy city of Islam was Petra, not Mecca.[11] If such a fundamental historical "fact" in Islamic history as the location of "Mecca" could have been created by Muslim revisionist historians, then how much can we trust their accounts of other matters? Therefore, there is good reason to be skeptical about many aspects of Muhammad's life as well as the emergence and expansion of Islam as set forth in Islamic traditions (their authority with Muslims notwithstanding). Thus, we are compelled to evaluate the historical narrative these traditions present in light of non-Muslim historical documents and archaeological evidence.

> *Such a fundamental "fact" in Islamic history as the location of "Mecca" could have been created by Muslim revisionist historians.*

What one finds is that when this is done, our view of Muhammad and Islam is significantly altered, along with our view of Muhammad in relation to redemptive history.

The sub-sections which follow reflect on various Christian views of Islam, a revised history of Muhammad and the movement he founded, and a theological reassessment of the prophet of Islam, all based on a potentially more objective portrayal of his character and actions.

Disparate Perceptions of Islam

Muhammad is regarded as the founder of the religion of Islam. Since our judgment of his possible prophethood will be in large measure determined by our assessment of Islam, we need to consider the origins, history, and nature of Islam and his relationship to it. Kate Zebiri notes the varied ways that Christians have looked at Islam.[12] These include:

> as a Christian heresy; as a harbinger of the end of the world; as diabolical; as a natural or man-made religion; as a punishment of Christian infidelity…; as a *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel); or as an independent way of salvation. On the other hand, many Christians, particularly in the modern period, have been hesitant to categorize Islam in such ways, either because this would be speculation on matters which can be known only to God, or because they do not see Islam as a reified or monolithic entity but rather in more fluid and undefined terms which would preclude making such generalizations.[13]

An in-depth evaluation of each of these perceptions of Islam is not possible here. However, a few comments are in order.

First, I do not view any kind of Islam as an alternative way of salvation apart from personal faith in Christ. Second, the Islamic traditions have not functioned, either historically or widely, as a preparation for the gospel for the Muslim community.[14] However, the Qur'an's testimony about Jesus has more recently facilitated a number of Muslims in embarking on a journey that led them to encountering him as savior.[15] Nonetheless, historically it seems that military, political, and theological Christian-Muslim conflicts rendered Islam more of an obstruction to the gospel than a preparation for it. It could be that the theological conflict has largely been the result of cultural conflict—similar to the dynamics in the culturally-rooted theological conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity in the book of Acts. The late Ralph D. Winter saw early Islam as a contextualization of the biblical faith for those Arabs who rejected the alien and unbiblical character of Arabian Judaism and Christianity.[16]

Many Eastern Christians gave thanks to God for the ascendancy of the Arabs, hailing their armies as liberators from their Byzantine oppressors. Other conquered Christians saw Islam primarily as a punishment on Christianity for their sins and disunity. They expected that after they repented, God would remove the Muslims, but this never materialized. Other Christians (particularly Byzantines)[17] who lost opportunity, status, political power, or territory spoke of Muhammad and Muslims in very pejorative terms.[18] As Islam evolved into a distinct religion, and became a competitor to Christianity, Muslim-Christian relations further degenerated. During the Crusades animosity increased on both sides and Islamic theology turned ever more hostile toward Christianity.[19]

Norman Daniel's extensive study of Islam in the 12th–14th centuries

portrays the nearly universal negative picture of Islam in the West.[20] Europeans often viewed Islam as the work of the devil or Antichrist.[21] This diabolic view of Islam still prevails in the West, as well as among national Christians in the Middle East. I, too, held this view in the past.

However, there are good reasons to challenge this pejorative view, as some reputable Christian scholars have been doing. The critical question is: *Does our present perception of Islam accurately represent what Islam was in the time of Muhammad and what he intended his movement to be?*

Divergent Histories of Muhammad and Muslims

Abdul-Haqq puts Muhammad in the tradition of the *ḥunafā'* (plural of *ḥanīf*):

> Pre-Islamic "Hunafa" God-fearers were pagan Arabs who had been exposed to Jewish and Christian monotheism. They claimed that their monotheistic tradition dated back to the Friend of God, Abraham. It was handed down by those spiritually alive during the pre-Islamic history of Arabia. According to the Koran, the prophet Muhammad came only as a reformer and a warner to pagan Arabs,[22] calling them back to Abrahamic monotheism.[23]

Support for Abdul-Haqq's view is found in the Armenian "Chronicle of Sebeos," a very early (7th century) record of how non-Muslims perceived Muhammad and his mission among the sons of Ishmael:[24]

> [Muhammad] as if by God's command appeared to them as a preacher [and] the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learnt and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion. Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham.... He said: "With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed

after him forever.... But now you are the sons of Abraham and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize the land which God gave to your father Abraham."[25]

Sebeos also has Muhammad in alliance with the Jews and notes that the Muslim movement's first governor of Jerusalem was a Jew.[26]

In addition, some reject the historical narrative proposed by Islamic tradition based on internal evidence of the Qur'an. They argue that Muhammad began his mission as an ecumenical movement of monotheist "Believers" that included numbers of Jews and Christians. Its focus was on devotion

Inscriptions contain only the phrase "There is no god, but God" with no mention of Muhammad.
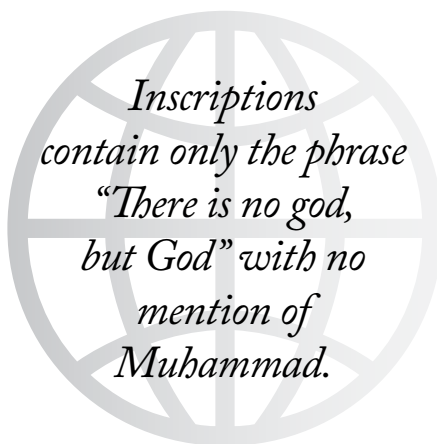
(esp. prayer and almsgiving) and the practice of righteousness and good deeds in preparation for the Day of Judgment.[27] Immeasurably more successful than Jerry Falwell's ambitions for the Moral Majority, Muhammad mobilized what we might call the Monotheistic Moral Majority, a movement that respected and incorporated Jews and Christians for two to three generations after his death. Fred Donner concludes that this "confessionally open" ecumenical movement was "in no way antithetical to the beliefs and practices of some Christians and Jews." They could belong not only because of their religious identities but because they were "inclined to righteousness."[28] The movement's theological teachings

do not seem to have been repugnant to many Christians of that period—unlike the situation that developed a century later.[29] It appears that many local Christian communities did not oppose the movement—in contrast to the Byzantine Christians.

Significant external evidence from archeology supports the ecumenical character of the Believers movement. For example, a coin found in Palestine dated in the 640s or 650s is inscribed with "Muhammad" and a person holding a cross.[30] Similar coins were minted by Muslim caliphs for up to a century. However, the Christian symbols were removed during the Umayyad era.[31] All inscriptions, coins and papyri with the *shahāda* until 685 contain only the phrase "There is no god, but God" with no mention of Muhammad. This would not have hindered Jews, Christians or other monotheists from joining the ranks of the Believers.[32] The absence of archaeological evidence of widespread violence and destruction of churches and towns in Syria-Palestine further supports the ecumenical character of Muhammad's movement.[33]

Non-Muslim historical documents in the formative period also point toward this ecumenism. In Egypt during the early period of Islam, the Arabic papyri make no mention of "Muslims," but instead we only find the terms "believers" *(mu'minûn)* and "emigrants" *(muhajirûn).*[34] Syrian Christians saw the movement as linked to descendants of Abraham and Hagar through Ishmael who confessed one God. Little more than a decade after the death of Muhammad, a document (dated 644 AD) written by Syrian Christians describes a religious discussion between the emir of the "immigrants" (the Arab conquerors) and the Syrian Patriarch, John of Sedreh. It noted that the immigrants accepted the Torah, like Jews and Samaritans, and described how Jewish scholars with the emir examined the Christians'

quotations from the Scriptures. Much of their discussion was about the Scriptures; yet, there was no reference to the Qur'an (perhaps indicating that it was not yet circulating) and there was no mention of a new religion. The term "Islam" was never used.[35]

Syriac Christian sources viewed the conquest as an ethnic (Arab) ascendency more than a sectarian religious one.[36] John of Phenek (d. 690s), a Nestorian Christian observed, "Among them [the Arabs] there are many Christians, some of whom are from the heretics, others from us."

Syriac writers referred to their leaders in secular and political terms, not by religious titles. Muhammad was called "the first king of the immigrants," and occasionally called "the Guide," "Teacher," "Leader" or "Great Ruler."[37] A letter (c. 647) from Isho'yahb III, the Nestorian patriarch in Iraq, states that they

> not only do not fight Christianity, they even commend our religion, show honor to the priests and monasteries and saints of our Lord, and make gifts to the monasteries and churches.[38]

It appears that two civil wars over political leadership created and intensified divisions between the Believers. The companions of the prophet disappeared from the scene and with them the last vestiges of the prophet's charisma and eschatological motivation. Donner observes,

> The conquests by now apparently had become less a matter of the personal zeal of individual Believers driven by vision of an impending Last Judgment and more a lucrative form of state policy intended to keep revenues and plunder flowing into the treasury.[39]

After the Second Civil War (680–692), 'Abd al-Malik sought to restore Umayyid political rule by appealing to religious authority and designated himself as Muhammad's successor. (Hence, the first attested documentary use of *khalifa/*caliph occurs in this period). For reasons that are not entirely clear, "Islam," the inclusive Believers

*E*vidence indicates that Christians who first encountered Islam regarded it as an alternative Christology, and only later as a Christian heresy.

movement,[40] began to be redefined to exclude Jews and Christians and morph into a distinct religion—one that over the centuries grew increasingly negative toward Christianity.[41]

During the Crusades and reconquest of Spain, mutual hostility increased markedly (as seen in the change from a Muslim understanding of *tāhrīf* as the Jewish/Christian distortion of the *meaning* of Scripture to the corruption of the actual *text* of the Scriptures).[42]

Reassessment of Muhammad's Theology

In light of the above considerations, many Christian scholars are reassessing their position on Muhammad, acknowledging him as an important religious leader whose prophetic message contains much that the Bible affirms—even if Islam eventually became more hostile to Christianity.[43]

It is significant that during the first century Christians did not seem to think of Muhammad as a false prophet. The evidence indicates that Christians who first encountered Islam regarded it as an alternative Christology, and only later as a Christian heresy. Therefore, it likely had more commonality with Christianity than is recognized today. Recent studies demonstrate that the Meccan *surahs* can fit into a context of conflicting Christianities, not the purported pagan context of Muslim tradition.[44] There is also much to be said in favor of considering the original Islam as a Jewish heresy because of its many parallels. Even more fruitful may be the suggestion of its links with Jewish Christianity.[45] Joseph Azzi, a Lebanese Christian, argues from Islamic sources that Muhammad's mentor, Waraqa ibn Nawful, was an Ebionite Christian priest.[46] Several German scholars think that a Jewish Christian Christology

was transmitted until Muhammad encountered and embraced it. The cultural compatibility and appeal of this type of Christology would seem to have allowed this to happen quite naturally.[47] Such a Christology would not have compromised the Abrahamic monotheism of the *hunafā'*, as did the aberrant Christologies of the Christians that Muhammad refuted in the Qur'an.

W. Cantwell Smith also questions the notion that Islam was originally a separate religion.[48] The early consideration of Islam as a Christian heresy, along with the many theological divisions in the Middle Ages, and the Muslim veneration of Jesus, compel Smith to believe that conversion from Christianity to Islam may then have been regarded as merely a change to another theological position.[49] This harmonizes with the view of scholars who contend that Qur'anic verses allegedly critical of Christianity are best understood as challenging or correcting unorthodox Christianities or disputed Christologies.[50] Reliable historical and textual evidence supports this understanding.

It is also significant that for more than a century orthodox churchmen referred to Muhammad's followers using the same terminology as they did of other branches of ancient Christianity. This indicates that they viewed Islam as an alternative Christology, not as a different religion. C. Jonn Block concludes that they even

> recognized a distinction between the teachings of Muhammad and the behaviors of his followers to the degree that Muhammad himself may have been considered a prophet from a Christian perspective

(as we shall see in the testimony of Timothy I).[51] Block asserts: (1) Surahs 4:171 and 5:173 are not a rejection of

the Trinity but a tri-theism as promoted by John Philoponus (pp. 44-52); (2) Surah 19:35 corrects the adoptionism of the Nestorians; (3) Surah 5:116 condemns Mariolatry; (4) the rejection of Jesus as "son of God" in Surah 2:116-117 pertains to Christian corruption of an apocryphal 4 Ezra text; and (5) Muhammad defended the Christianity of his in-law, Waraqa ibn Nawful.[52]

This more positive attitude toward Muhammad, his message and his mission is not a new innovation, but rather a return to the trend of the earliest period of Christian-Muslim encounter. After a millennium of spiteful scholarship, most Christians unfortunately assume that their forebears always regarded Muhammad as a false prophet.[53]
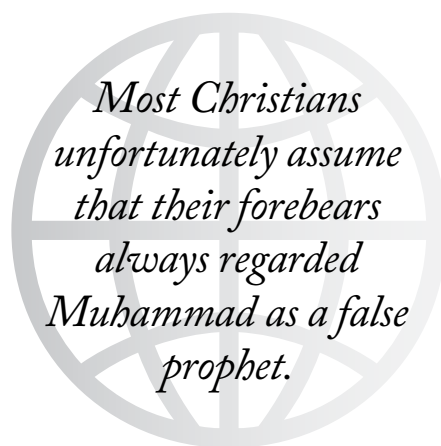
Rehabilitation of Muhammad
Biblical scholars have sought to make a more accurate and balanced assessment of Saul's life and character. Should a similar effort be conducted with the prophet of Islam?

To begin with, available information from Islamic sources on Muhammad's early life portrays him as a sincere seeker of truth and of honorable character, a picture that has not been appreciated by Christians and Western societies. These tend to have belabored his moral failures. Recognizing this, Montgomery Watt states, "Of all the world's great men none has been so maligned as Muhammad." He mitigates most of Muhammad's alleged moral failures by pointing out that they were largely for the sake of strengthening Islam's position or departing from tribal tradition and were not serious departures from the standards of his time.[54]

F. Buhl views Muhammad's character in a positive manner in light of his early reception of divine communications (but not his infallibility). He says:

> The scientific student therefore does not see in Muhammad a deceiver but fully agrees with the impression of sincerity and truthfulness which his

utterances in the older revelations make…the cogent imperatives… the self-denunciation…along with the fact that he unselfishly endured years of hostility and humiliation in Mecca in the unshakable conviction of his lofty task. It is more difficult with the later Madinese revelations, in which it is often only too easy to detect the human associations, to avoid the supposition that his paroxysms…could sometimes be artificially brought on, and there is even a tradition which makes 'A'isha say to the Prophet: "Thy Lord seems to have been very quick in fulfilling thy prayers." It must not be forgotten however that natures like this, without actually being conscious of it, are able to provoke the same states of

Most Christians unfortunately assume that their forebears always regarded Muhammad as a false prophet.

excitation which earlier arose without their assistance; and so probably not only were his followers in Madina…but he himself was convinced, that the spirit was continually hovering about him to communicate the revelations to him. By this we do not of course mean that in his ecstatic condition he received the divine communications *in extenso,* as we now have them in the Kur'an; only the foundations were given him, which he afterwards developed into discourse of greater lengths. Since in doing this he used the external forms of the old Arab soothsayers it is natural that the Meccans took him for one, but it does not follow that he was spiritually akin from the first to those soothsayers who were inspired by *djinns* [spirits].[55]

To explore the possibility of ascribing a legitimate prophetic role for Muhammad requires a theological discussion about revelation, types of prophecy, and the impartation process of the Qur'an. This I will proceed to do. I will subsequently propose a set of criteria, both invalid and proper, for evaluating a prophet. Finally, I will reconsider the possibility of viewing Muhammad as a prophet.

II. Theology of Revelation Reconsidered
In this section I look at the possibility of special revelation in the present (or church) age, the nature, kinds and recipients of post-canonical and present-day prophecy, the power of general revelation as an impetus to prophecy, and finally the source, character, manner, and process by which the Qur'an was given.

Special Revelation in the Present
I fully affirm the traditional theological distinction between general and special revelation; yet, I suggest that we reassess some of our assumptions.

Christopher Little defines special revelation as

> God's communication of himself at specific times in specific ways with specific truths in order to reconcile specific individuals and communities to himself.

It is also redemptive (aimed at reconciling humanity to God), personal, progressive, and propositional (communicating knowledge essential for belief and adherence in order to have a right relationship with God).[56] Scriptural modalities (or means) of special revelation include the casting of lots, the urim and thummin, dreams, visions, theophanies, angels, the prophets, Jesus Christ and the Bible.[57] After a study of pertinent biblical figures in salvation history, Little asserts,

> The response of faith to the truths revealed by way of the modalities of special revelation is the sole means by which God redeems people throughout human history.[58]

However, some currently question whether God continues to use among the unevangelized other modalities of special revelation besides Jesus Christ and the Bible (yet never in contradiction to the Bible). Three of the stronger reasons to support that he does are:

1. Throughout church history prominent theologians have held that dreams are a source of divine revelation. Morton Kelsey declares:

   > Everyone of the apologists . . . believed in healing and dreams, in supernaturally given information and visions.

   Kelsey lists subsequent church leaders who continued to hold to this view of the supernatural.[59]

2. The situation of many unevangelized today parallels that of many individuals in the OT (such as Eve, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek, and Job) who, though not possessing God's written word, received a message from him through other modalities of special revelation.[60]

3. Even after God's word was enscriptured, he continued to use other revelatory modalities. For example, even though the magi and Cornelius were acquainted with Jewish Scripture, God used a star and an angel to lead them to salvation.[61]

Although I had been taught that God no longer used revelatory modalities apart from the Scriptures, this position lacks clear biblical support. On the contrary, Scriptures like Joel 2:28ff. indicate that prophecy, dreams and visions will characterize the pouring out of God's Spirit in the last days.[62] Moreover, there is no theological reason to prohibit God from employing them. On the contrary, to so assert would seem to limit His sovereignty. Scripture itself testifies that God did not restrict Himself to Hebrew prophets to communicate His message, for He not only used Balaam but even used Balaam's donkey. Furthermore,

*T*his type of prophecy, exercised as a gift of the Spirit in the early church, was not infallible, but was carefully examined, evaluated, or weighed.

a denial of present manifestations of these other modalities cannot satisfactorily explain their abundant appearance in mission history. For example, Woodberry's research showed over half of Muslim background believers surveyed experienced one or more dreams or visions before or after conversion.[63]

Post-Canonical and Present-day Prophecy

Having examined evidence for the theological possibility of post-canonical special revelation, we can now look specifically at the possibility of valid present-day prophecy. This requires that we first understand the nature of prophecy in the Bible.[64]

Conservative evangelicals recognize two kinds of prophets. The major prophets of the canonical OT were mediums of the authoritative revelation that became the inerrant or infallible Word of God—in their original autographs. The second kind was in the schools of the prophets, a distinction evidenced by passages such as Numbers 12:6-8 and 11:29. Their "charismatic and enigmatic" messages are the type envisioned by Joel's prophecy that Peter said was fulfilled on Pentecost (Ac. 1:16). This type of prophecy, exercised as a gift of the Spirit in the NT church, was not infallible, but had to be carefully examined, evaluated, or weighed as 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 instruct. The word used here is *diakrino* and implies a mixed quality that had to be sifted like chaff from wheat. We must also recognize that it was Christ's apostles (and not these prophets) who were the heirs of the OT canonical prophets, with regard to authorship of infallible revelation in the NT.[65] Accepting the validity of this distinction between these two types of prophecy, we can allow for a continuance of

prophets whose utterances do not supersede biblical authority.

Special Revelation Beyond the Jewish-Christian Border

While acknowledging such a possibility for those in the Judeo-Christian heritage, some may question the possible existence of such prophets outside of this stream. However, they should remember that Balaam was the recipient of divine revelation from the true God whom he claimed as "the Lord my God" (Num. 22:18).

Don Richardson offers a possible example of revelation to a pagan seer/prophet and philosopher-poet. Epimenides provides the backdrop for Paul's quoting him (Acts 17:28) in his sermon about the "unknown god." This pagan poet/prophet was consulted as to the cause of an unrelenting plague in Athens. He concluded their offense was not against any of the Athenian gods, but an unknown god. He advised them to let loose hungry sheep on the lush pastures of Mars Hill. On each place where a hungry sheep lay down without grazing, that sheep was sacrificed, and the plague subsided.[66] The Herman Bavinck quote above listed this passage as proof of God's revelation among the pagans.[67]

General Revelation is Special

For those who cannot accept the possibility of present day special revelation, Johan H. Bavinck, the Dutch missionary theologian, expands the traditional boundaries of general revelation. Bavinck does this by challenging a theological understanding of general revelation that is often associated with "infantile natural theology" or "philosophical conclusions of the human mind."[68] Though available to all, God is actively engaged in it—in a way that others would associate with special revelation. Bavinck explains:

When the Bible speaks of general revelation, it means something quite different. There it has a much more personal nature. It is divine concern for men collectively and individually. God's deity and eternal power are evident; they overwhelm man; they strike him suddenly in moments when he thought they were far away. They creep up on him; they do not let go of him, even though man does his best to escape them. Escaping from them and repressing them is the human answer to God's revelation, an answer that becomes evident in the history of the religion of man....

In the "night of power"[69] of which the ninety-seventh sura of the Koran speaks, the night when "the angels descended" and the Koran descended from Allah's throne, God dealt with Muhammad and touched him. God wrestled with him in that night, and God's hand is still noticeable in the answer of the prophet, but it is also the result of human oppression. "The great moments in the history of religion are the moments when God wrestled with man in a very particular way...."

God can at times, as it were, stop the noiseless engines of repression and exchange and overwhelm man to such an extent that he is powerless for the moment. There is, also, always the silent activity of the Holy Spirit inside man, even if he resists Him constantly. The way in which Isaiah speaks of Cyrus, the anointed one, who was called by His name and girded by God (Is. 45:4, 5), indicates that the Bible certainly leaves the possibility open for God to anoint those who do not know Him with His Spirit and to gird them for certain tasks to which He calls them.[70]

Bavinck asserts that it was truly God (not an evil angel) whom Muhammad encountered in his revelatory experiences. He holds that human religion is the result of varied responses in degrees of repression and substitution (as in Rom. 1:18-28) to these divine encounters. Religions are not all the same, and we can infer that he recognizes in Islam a high degree of divine influence, when he says:

We meet figures in the history of the non-Christian religions of whom we feel that God wrestled with them in a very particular way. We still notice traces of that process of suppression and substitution in the way they responded, but occasionally we observe a far greater influence of God there than in many other human religions.[71]

Thus Bavinck can acknowledge that Muhammad (at least at some point and in some way) encountered the true and living God in his revelatory experiences. Contradictory differences from biblical revelation could be attributed to imperfect responses by him, by the community that succeeded him, and by the People of the Book whom they encountered. Let us look closer at what may have transpired.

Human religion is the result of varied responses of repression and substitution to divine encounter.
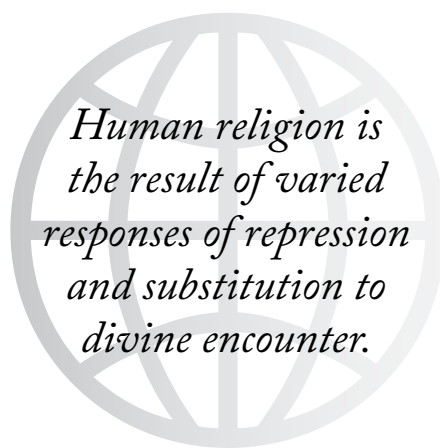
The Impartation Process of Qur'anic Revelation

Kenneth Cragg declares that we cannot honestly appraise the Prophet of Islam apart from a true understanding of the manner in which the Qur'anic revelation was imparted to him, for "His words are not his own devising. The Qur'an is revelation imparted" (Surah 53:3,4). Cragg understands and appreciates the traditional Islamic view of *wahy* (revelation) as "celestial dictation," but he rejects any view of Muhammad's inspiration that expunges human involvement.

Is apostolate really to be understood by the analogy of stone figures devised by cunning plumbers and sculptors to impress the eye but which deceive none save the unwary? Does prophethood have no part but that of a mere channel otherwise uninvolved? The undoubted fact that the original source is beyond prophethood itself need not reduce the prophet to a pair of lips.[72]

Fazlur Rahman relies on the earliest account of Ibn Hisham that states that Muhammad "awoke" as inferring his revelation came while he was in a state of a vision or quasi-dream. Rahman presents a reasoned rejection of theories that attribute Muhammad's revelatory experiences to epilepsy, but he also rejects the traditional Islamic idea of an angel speaking to Muhammad in a normal state of consciousness, attributing that to the creative theological labors of later orthodoxy—a formulation that is actually anti-Qur'anic.

This was supposed to guarantee the externality of the Angel or the Voice in the interests of safeguarding the "objectivity" of the Revelation. The attempt may seem to us intellectually immature, but at the time when the dogma was in the making, there were compelling reasons for taking this step, particularly the controversies against the rationalists. A great deal of Ḥadīth... commonly accepted later, came into existence portraying the Prophet talking to the Angel in public and graphically describing the appearance of the latter. Despite the fact that it is contradicted by the Qur'an which says "...We sent him (the Angel) down upon your *heart* that you may be a warner" (XXVI, 194, cf. II, 97) this idea of the externality of the Angel and the Revelation has become so ingrained in the general Muslim mind that the real picture is anathema to it.[73]

Rahman supports his view that the Prophet's revelations were inner spiritual experiences with Surah 53:11-12 "The heart has not falsified what it has seen," and Surah 17:1 and 81:23. Hence, he rejects the doctrine of a physical *miʿrāj* (ascension of Muhammad) and charges it with being "no more than a historical fiction" that was

developed by "orthodoxy" with fabricated hadith, being patterned after the ascension of Christ.[74]

Cragg also challenges the "celestial dictation" view of Qur'anic revelation from a number of angles. Like Rahman, he focuses on the fact that the Qur'an states that the revelation came via Muhammad's "heart" (26:194; 2:97), not just by way of his lips. He notes that *tanzīl*, God's sending down the revelation, is also applied to the giving of iron to mankind in Surah 57:25: "We have sent down iron which has such great strength and diverse uses for mankind." This parallel suggests that a looser manner of bestowal of divine revelation than the "orthodox" view may be what the Qur'an intends.[75] Moreover, Cragg gives strong reasons why the orthodox belief in Muhammad's illiteracy is quite unlikely. More probably, the disputed meaning of the phrase in Surah 7 *al-rasūl al-nabī al-ummī* (the "unlettered" prophet-apostle) means that he was the "unscriptured" prophet-apostle; in contrast to the People of the Book, Muhammad and his people to whom he was sent did not have the Scripture in their own language.[76] This explains why the plural form of *ummī* often appears in contradistinction to *al-Yahūd* (the Jews) who had the Scriptures. If this is the meaning, then the *i'jāz* (miraculous or wondrous nature) of the Qur'an does not refer to its being a linguistic miracle, but rather to the wonder of the message of monotheism coming in the language of the Arabs, akin in significance to Moses' receiving the law for the Jews.[77]

In essence, a more realistic and accurate understanding of the process of Qur'anic revelation would be on the order of what Cragg has advocated: "as proceeding within a full engagement of mental and spiritual capacity, responsive to living situations" and

> recognizing in the great original an experience, not merely of loyal spokesmanship that had no other

*O*ur problem in handling Muhammad's prophethood is that we are unfamiliar with prophetic figures like him in mission history.

dimension, but of vivid personal commission known only through vision, by travail and in intensity of soul.[78]

Such a view not only handles the Qur'anic and historic data more soundly, but it is also compatible with the common biblical portrayal of prophetic experience (whether it be either the canonical or the common type of prophecy). As Christians, we do not regard the Qur'an to be utterly infallible and authoritative, but need not rule out the possibility of God's calling and using Muhammad as a prophet (like Saul in the OT or a charismatic prophet in the present era).

A second reason for our problem in handling the issue of Muhammad's prophethood is that we are unfamiliar with the existence of prophetic figures like him who have arisen in mission history. Gottfried Oosterwal in his *Modern Messianic Movements* reflects on the existence of the multitude of modern religious movements around the world that have derived their central themes from Christianity.[79] In spite of the diverse cultural, social, economic, political, ideological and religious conditions in which they arise, there are significant similarities between them:

> 'prophets' and charismatic leaders, a crisis situation, ecstatic tendencies, a special revelation and a movement that suddenly arises and totally absorbs its adherents, giving them a whole new life-style, a new ethos, a new morality, and often leading to great reforms.[80]

But that which is at their heart is their eschatology as proclaimed by a prophet or charismatic leader.

An amazing example of this phenomenon is William Wadé Harris. In the context of his people having been plundered, fined, resettled and the

victims of a costly war, Harris was in prison when in a trance he was called to be a prophet of the end times by the angel Gabriel. David Shank chronicles his little known story:

> Convinced through Russellite influences that Christ was soon to bring in the kingdom of peace, Harris predicted World War I as a judgment on the civilized world, and then announced a difficult period of seven years, before everything was to be transformed by the reign of Christ. Seeing himself as the Elijah of Malachi 4, he felt he had appeared before the great and dreadful day of the Lord in order to prepare the people for the coming kingdom of peace, during which he was to be the judge responsible for West Africa.[81]

Western missionaries reported that the number of his converts in a matter of months exceeded the combined efforts of all their missions over decades—100,000 tribal Africans baptized in 18 months, many of them ready to be taught by the "white man with the Book" ten years after the event.[82] Shank typifies his profound impact through the testimony of the politician, Casely Hayford:

> You come to him with a heart full of bitterness, and when he is finished with you all the bitterness is gone out of your soul… Why, he calls upon the living God. He calms, under God, the troubled soul. He casts out strife… He brings joy and lightness of soul to the despairing. This thing must be of God.[83]

We are compelled to acknowledge him as the greatest evangelist in the history of West Africa and his legacy to the church was unprecedented. But, his calling was not as an evangelist, but as a prophet. Fellow African, Lamen Sanneh, refers to him and others like him as "charismatic prophets."[84] Yet

others may be troubled by his having been called to prophethood by an angel (reminiscent of Joseph Smith),[85] and certainly by his self-identity as Elijah and judge, and by his erroneous prediction about the advent of the Kingdom.

Oosterwal depicts the theological and missiological challenge created by such movements:

> All this points to a causative factor that transcends all human factors and suggests that, ultimately, the prophetic revelations and messianic movements are a problem of theology,

not the problem of the social and scientific disciplines. He asks:

> Why do these millions of people, Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and "secularists," people of ethnic religions…suddenly expect the soon coming of a messiah, or of a "new heaven and a new earth"?… Do they have the same source as the original Christian teaching of the coming Kingdom of Christ, or are they perhaps human, even diabolic, distortions of or reactions against the Christian expectation of the messiah?… What is the relationship between (the message of) salvation in these messianic movements and the salvation in Christ witnessed in the Holy Scriptures, and in the extension of the Christian churches and missions?[86]

In light of abundant anthropological evidence throughout all parts of the world, Oostewal holds as untenable the view that the messianic movements are strictly due to contact with Christianity.[87] He challenges the standard missionary assessment:

> the prophets are called liars, the messiahs, false, and the movements an antichristian threat to the Truth. For any prophet, any religion that comes after Christ, can only be antichrist.[88]

Oosterwal asserts that the matter is not so simple, for a good number of the prophets and charismatic leaders of these movements were trained in Christian schools and served in the churches. On the other hand he adds,

Does not the Bible itself mention even false prophets who were inspired by God to reveal truth, and 'pagans,' whom God used as His instruments to instruct, to guide and to direct His people?[89]

A parallel principle is found in Anthony Hoekema. He declared the cults to be the "unpaid bills of the church," having observed how they each pick up important truths neglected by the church. Although they have built their entire movement around these teachings, the church can and must learn from them.[90] Does only that which is entirely orthodox manifest the workings of God? Does the existence of error of any kind render someone demonically inspired? Hence, a prophetic

Does only that which is entirely orthodox manifest the workings of God?
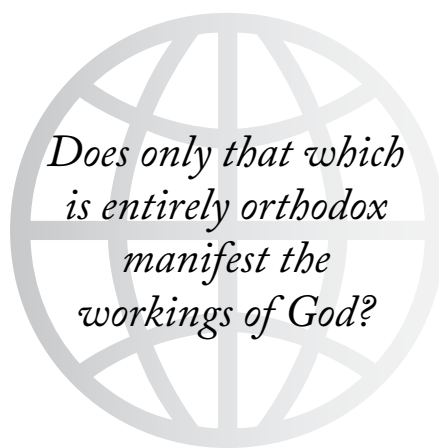
leader under the overall influence of the Holy Spirit could be in error on a particular issue[91] while the leader of a cult could hold a position on a particular issue that is more biblical.

Many Christians need to rethink their attitude toward those whose doctrines differ from their own. We should also consider the possibility that many non-Chalcedonian Christians (whom the Western church has regarded as unorthodox or heretical) may be in heaven because of their genuine trust in the Lord Jesus Christ; whereas some theologically orthodox (in the Chalcedonian sense) may not really know Him (cf. Mat. 7:21-23). Alan Richardson concludes:

> Many heretics, whose opinions the Church had to condemn, were men of saintly character, actuated only by the sincerest desire to promote the true religion of the Lord Jesus…. On the whole the greatest heretics—"the heresiarchs"—were honest Christians, zealous for the promotion of a true and reverent Christian theology.[92]

Consequently, our assessment of religious movements and leaders cannot be based solely upon whether they are in or out of the fold of Christian orthodoxy (as defined by one particular creed of the church). How then might we go about this? What then should be our assessment criteria? That is our next subject.

III. Criteria for Prophethood Reconsidered

In this section, I will demonstrate the inadequacy of the most commonly used criteria for validating or rejecting prophets (their moral blamelessness, their absence of hostility with Christianity or their performance of miracles). Instead I will propose that the most important issue is their attitude toward Christ and the Scriptures.

Not Moral Blamelessness

First, let it be said that the basis of our assessing a prophet's gifting or calling cannot be moral blamelessness or abstinence from use of force. The Corinthian prophets, like most of the other gifted believers in the church seemed to have been quite carnal. And even prophets of the canonical type committed grave sin: David committed adultery and shed innocent blood in order to cover up his sin. Solomon, who authored three books in the OT canon, makes Muhammad's weakness for women pale in comparison to his passions; he "loved many foreign women" and had "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." Moreover, Solomon participated in their idolatry in his old age (1 Kg. 11:1–6), as did Gideon (Jud. 8:27), whereas Muhammad was

faithful to worship only the Creator. Furthermore, Muhammad's view and use of force and political means for the sake of religion is not strange to the Semitic mentality. Gideon and David combined military, political and spiritual leadership. Nehemiah used violence to enforce God's law and preserve communal purity, beating and pulling out the hair of those who had married or given sons in marriage to foreign women (Neh. 13:25). Are we also to condemn Joshua, who was divinely directed to undertake a campaign of total annihilation of the Canaanites (including their children)?

In his lectures, Woodberry highlights the predominantly OT-like context of Muhammad, referring to him as a BC-like prophet during an AD time frame. Examples of similar phenomena may be seen in Acts 18–19 (albeit not exact parallels). Apollos preached powerfully and boldly about Jesus (an evidence of the Holy Spirit's anointing in Luke's theology), yet knew (and apparently taught) the baptism of John. Unacquainted with the theology of the new dispensation, he preached an important, but somewhat incomplete, message belonging to the prior era—until instructed by Aquila and Priscilla. In Acts 19, Paul encounters a group of disciples who were still following John the Baptist, having not even heard of the Holy Spirit. It may be that Muhammad was living faithfully according to the theology of a previous dispensation. We need also to remember that OT prophets who addressed non-Jews (like Jonah, Nahum and possibly Obadiah) did not preach obedience to the Mosaic law, the prophetic message to the Jews. Rather, they emphasized fundamental theological and ethical truths such as we find in the Qur'an. Furthermore, we cannot judge the level of Muhammad's gospel knowledge based simply on what is present in the Qur'an. The many Qur'anic references to biblical narratives indicate that the audience was well acquainted with these stories that Muhammad alluded to and affirmed.

*W*oodberry highlights the OT–like context of Muhammad, referring to him as a BC–like prophet during an AD time frame.

Returning to the issue of our assessing a prophet and his message, Oosterwal also asserts that it cannot in fairness be the excesses or immoral behavior of a minority of the movements' adherents, neither can we compare our high moral ideals with their low actual behavior; because the same can be done with Christianity. Rather we must evaluate these movements with a holistic understanding of them as well as by valid theological criteria—which for Oosterwal is the same as it is for Christian churches—it is simply "the person, the life and the mission of Jesus Christ."[93]

Confirming Christ
Granting the possibility of legitimacy of a post-biblical prophet, the issue becomes: by what criteria are we to evaluate his revelation? Christopher Little, following Barth, states that information from God must:

> (1) conform to and agree with Jesus Christ; (2) attest to Jesus Christ without subtraction, addition, or alteration; (3) confirm that Jesus Christ has in some way been encountered by those who speak and relate to it; (4) agree with the witness of Scripture; (5) be affirmed by the dogmas and confessions of the church; and (6) manifest good fruit....Therefore, any revelation that is not substantiated and supported by either Jesus Christ as presented in Scripture or by Scripture itself, must be rejected and renounced. In other words, the Bible is our complete, final and ultimate authority when it comes to all matters pertaining to Christian faith and practice.[94]

Unquestionably, Christ and the Scriptures must be our ultimate authority for assessment. However, we must be careful and clarify the implications of declaring

> any revelation that is not substantiated and supported by either Jesus Christ as presented in Scripture or by Scripture itself, must be rejected and renounced.

As I argued in the section on post-canonical and present day revelation, we need only reject the parts that are in error—not the entire revelation. Unfortunately, Western thought patterns do not naturally facilitate such moderation. We think in terms of black and white, or in what Hiebert calls "bounded sets."[95] Thus we regard a prophetic message or movement as either true or false. If it is totally true, we reason, it may be inspired by God; but if it contains error, it is false, heretical, and inspired by the devil.

A more sensitive, balanced approach to prophetic evaluation would incorporate Hiebert's thinking in terms of "centered sets," in contrast to "bounded sets."[96] To use centered sets in viewing conversion we would look at a person's direction and movement toward or away from Christ—as opposed to "bounded set" categories of saved and unsaved. The former regards a person as a Christian if he is following Christ; whereas, the latter wants to know whether a person has accepted Christ, by making a decision or praying a prayer that will clearly mark his transfer into the set of the saved.

It seems to me that both approaches have validity and can be found in the Scripture. But bounded set thinking tends to look much more at the informational dimension—does a person believe (know and accept) the right facts (the message of salvation, the correct doctrines) or not. In contrast, centered set thinking focuses on the relational aspect: Is the person seeking Christ and obeying him—regardless of the degree of his knowledge of the truth about Jesus? A centered set approach would have little difficulty in accepting that the twelve apostles (except Judas) were saved even as novice disciples of Jesus. In contrast, bounded set thinkers may

struggle in determining when these apostles understood enough of Jesus' nature and identity and the gospel to be considered "saved."[97]

I would suggest that we also appropriate Kraft's thinking on three-dimensional contextualization (1999).[98] We would then evaluate a prophet or a prophecy in terms of the three dimensions of allegiance/relationship (attitude toward and distance from Christ), truth/knowledge (accuracy and completeness with regard to the Scriptures), and power/freedom (the spiritual fruit of his message in his life and in the lives of his followers).

Evaluation of a prophet and his message using these criteria would consider the direction and distance with regard to Christ in terms of allegiance, truth, and power dimensions. Using these criteria, we can view Muhammad's message in a positive prophetic sense, though not one that is sufficient by itself.

1. Regarding allegiance/relationship (with Christ) it was very positive, though more distant than in the NT. Jesus is presented as unique—bearing titles and ascriptions that exalt him far above all other prophets and the Qur'an strongly affirms the biblical Scriptures that bear witness to him. While we do not find in the Qur'an the detailed accounts of Jesus' life and teaching that the Gospels provide, the Qur'an does warn that those who do not accept the previous Scriptures are unbelievers who have an appointment with hellfire.[99]

2. With respect to truth, the Qur'an was largely accurate regarding OT themes like God's unity, idolatry, sin, judgment, the need for righteous living, and even a high view of Christ, even if there were some errors in details. Muhammad's message may be viewed as a contextually driven presentation of biblical themes. The chief concern of the Christian is the presence

of Qur'anic verses that appear critical of Christianity. However, as previously mentioned, I am persuaded that these verses attack aberrant, not biblical, Christianity.[100] Thus, we may be able to more readily support his being a prophet of the common kind—not the canonical kind (like the prophetic and apostolic writers of the Holy Bible). Muhammad's teaching was neither comprehensive nor complete regarding Christ, but in his context of conflicting Christianities these would have been widely known, and he adamantly proclaimed the value of those biblical Scriptures and the necessity of believing in

We would evaluate a prophet in terms of allegiance, truth and power.
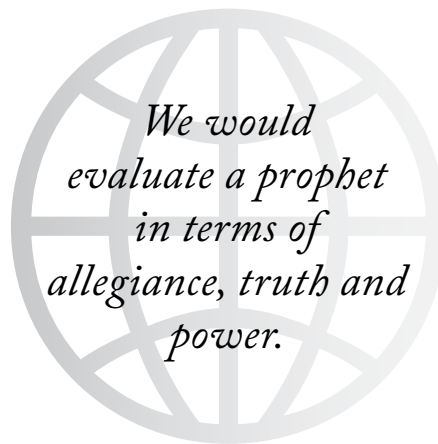
them.[101] His message brought nothing significantly new; rather it was a confirmation of the message of the biblical Scriptures in an Arabic language.

3. Regarding the power dimension, the Prophet of Islam led the Arabs in turning from idolatry, injustice, and iniquity toward the worship of the God of their ancestor Abraham.[102] An objective appraisal of his mission must consider that Muhammad eliminated the infanticide of baby girls, was an advocate for the poor, cleansed Mecca of its many idols, and united the Arab tribes around the worship of the God of Abraham—all in one generation.

Not Absence of Conflict with Christians

The hostility that emerged much later between Islam and Christianity does not necessarily preclude a positive prophetic role for Muhammad, for a parallel situation exists with many of the "cargo-cults" of the Pacific. Mircea Eliade explains the irony of their eventually becoming hostile to Christianity. If we substitute the words "Muslims" for "natives" and "Christians" for "missionaries", he could well have been describing Islam's relationship with Christianity:

> If the natives came to feel disappointed in the missionaries, if the majority of the "cargo-cults"[103] ultimately turned anti-Christian, it was not on account of anything in Christianity itself, but because the missionaries and their converts did not appear to conduct themselves as true Christians. The disillusionments that the natives suffered in their encounter with official Christianity were many and tragic. For what attracted the natives to Christianity the most powerfully was their preaching of the coming renewal of the World, the imminent arrival of Christ and the resurrection of the dead; it was the prophetic and eschatological aspects of the Christian religion that awakened in them the most profound echo. But it was precisely these aspects of Christianity that the missionaries seemed in practice to ignore or not take seriously.[104]

Similarly, it seems likely, that Muhammad recognized that Jews had the Word of God, but were guilty of *taḥrīf* (corrupting it) by their living and teaching.[105] Christians, were "nearest in affection" (Surah 5:82) to the Muslim believers, but were divided and various heresies were promulgated among them. Consequently, Muhammad preached the eschatological themes, such as the resurrection, the return of Christ, and the reward and judgment that were so neglected by the Christians who were embroiled in Christological controversies. Although the portrayal of Christ was not nearly as complete as found in the NT, it was

uniquely positive, and the injunction incumbent upon him and his followers was to ask the People of the Book regarding the absent, unclear or debatable issues of special revelation (10:94), thereby affirming the message of biblical Scripture. Part of Islam's eventual turning anti-Christian, was not necessarily due to anything in the gospel itself, but because Christians did not appear to conduct themselves as true Christians (the Byzantines in their veneration of relics, Western Christians in their Crusades and the resentful Eastern Christians in their withdrawal from witness). However, as noted earlier by Bavinck, a primary factor involved in the subsequent strife with Christianity was due to the repression of divine revelation—both sides "suppress[ed] the truth by their unrighteousness." (Rom. 1:18, NET Bible)

Not Miracles and Signs

Early Christian refutations of Muhammad's claim to prophethood were based on his not having performed any miracles. Most orthodox Muslim scholars reject the miracles attributed to Muhammad in later traditions, but appeal to the Qur'an as Muhammad's miracle *(i'jāz).* However, if Cragg's view above is correct, then the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an does not refer to a miracle, but rather to the marvel that God's message was now in Arabic.

We are led to ask what was the motivation behind the invention of Muhammad's miracles? Perhaps some were the result of devoted Muslims who would go to any measure to preserve the honor of their religion as a consequence of the debates with their opponents (Christians). Based on the presupposition of pious Muslims that Muhammad was the last and greatest prophet, he by definition must have done miracles that were at least equal to those of Jesus. When speaking to the many Muslims who believe in the miracles of Muhammad, we can remind them that the Qur'anic testimony denies this; moreover, we

A primary factor in the strife was the repression of divine revelation—both sides suppressed the truth by their unrighteousness.

should point out to them that failure of the early Muslim apologists to cite any miracles of Muhammad in reply to challenges of the early Christian apologists' is strong evidence that his alleged miracles were a later invention.

Nevertheless, Christians should recognize that performance of miracles is not a necessary proof of prophethood per se. Except for Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, most OT prophets were not characterized by performance of miracles. In the same way, NT prophets did not frequently perform miracles (in contradistinction to the Apostles).[106] Nevertheless, we can affirm that the performance of numerous miracles is an indication of the elevated rank of those prophets of God who perform them. We can support this by noting the higher regard given to Moses, Elijah and Elisha by the Jews. Moses is revered above the latter two, because of his role as mediator of the divine revelation. Elijah was more esteemed than Elisha, due to his role as the eschatological forerunner of the coming kingdom (Mal. 4:5). However, Jesus declared one who performed no miracles, John the Baptist, to be the greatest of all the prophets and more than a prophet. This was due to his role in preparing the way for and pointing people to the Messiah (Mt. 11:9–11). Recall that this is the same theological gauge for measuring the contribution of any prophet that we presented earlier in this discussion: the prophets' ultimate significance is in their pointing to Christ.

Muhammad's unique role was as bearer of God's message in Arabic. However, this contradicts the traditional Islamic view that Muhammad instituted a new religion that abrogated the previous revelation. We must challenge this by appealing to the Qur'an's

witness that he confirmed the prior revelations in the *Tawrat* and *Injīl.* We should also clarify for Muslims the biblical position that Jesus did not actually abrogate the law of Moses, but fulfilled it (Mt. 5:17ff).[107] Even though abrogation or supercession was argued by some of the early Arab Christian apologists, this position needs to be nuanced. In the case of Moses and Jesus, miracles served as divine attestation to the authority of their teaching (He. 1:2–4) that was essential in marking a new phase in salvation history, but not an abrogation. Jesus did not abrogate the law, although he did introduce a major change in salvation history by inaugurating the prophesied kingdom of God. His miracles, done in such incomparable abundance and power, demonstrated that the power and signs of the eschatological kingdom reign of God were inaugurated by his earthly ministry. His authority is mediated in the present through His followers, and will culminate when he establishes the kingdom in its fullness at his second coming.[108]

To summarize, a more biblically sound position would not assert the necessity of performance of miracles to establish prophethood. But bountiful performance of miracles is a major evidence of increased rank among prophets (as well as apostles). Regular and direct (unmediated by angels) revelation and communication with God is another mark of distinction. But, as I will argue in the next section, ultimate greatness in a prophet is a function of his pointing people to Christ. Therefore, we could allow the possibility that Muhammad is a prophet in the biblical sense explained in the preceding section, and in the Qur'anic mode of being a warner to his people, without requiring his performance of miracles. However, while we appreciate, respect

and affirm Muhammad's greatness, and the possibility of prophethood, we cannot honor him with a greater status than Jesus (or even Moses).

It may help (non-fanatical) Muslims to see that there is Qur'anic support for this status.

> Of those messengers, We have caused some to excel others, some to whom God spoke, and some of them He exalted in degree (above others); and We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (miraculous signs) and supported him with the Holy Spirit. (Surah 2:253)

Here the Qur'an notes that prophets hold different ranks. To whom did God speak? It implies that Moses is the one who was greater than others, because he spoke directly with God (apart from angelic mediation). Who are those whom God exalted in degree? The arch-example is Jesus, who alone is named in context immediately afterwards. We can logically infer that he was exalted in degree, because he not only spoke directly with God like Moses, but also performed the most miraculous signs and wonders. Muhammad, despite his noble accomplishments and greatness, did neither, and thus by implication, holds a lesser rank than those who did. Muhammad did no miracles, so he is not to be regarded as equal to those like Moses, and certainly not to Jesus. Muhammad presented a powerful and positive witness to Christ among the Arabs, and other peoples of the world. In this sense we can regard him as the greatest prophet to the Arabs, because for most Arabs, it is his noble witness to Christ that they have heard.

Admittedly, most Christians would view this perspective with skepticism or disfavor, given the fact that the Islamic teaching about Christ is but a faint shadow of what is offered in the Bible. But that does not invalidate Muhammad's testimony to Christ. In a similar manner, Jewish religious teachers and systems missed Moses'

witness to Christ. Similarly, during certain periods medieval Christianity in the West degenerated into a religious shell devoid of the gospel of Christ; yet, we do not impugn the Bible for this tragedy.

Research into gospel movements among Muslims reveals the potential efficacy of Muhammad's testimony to Christ. David Garrison was surprised to learn that it was the witness of the Qur'an which had brought many Muslims in South Asia to "initial" faith in Christ who then led them to the Bible for a clearer understanding. For instance, someone named Amid had been challenged to stop reciting the Qur'an in Arabic (which he did not understand) and to begin reading

It entails interpreting the Qur'an exegetically with regard to its biblical subtext.
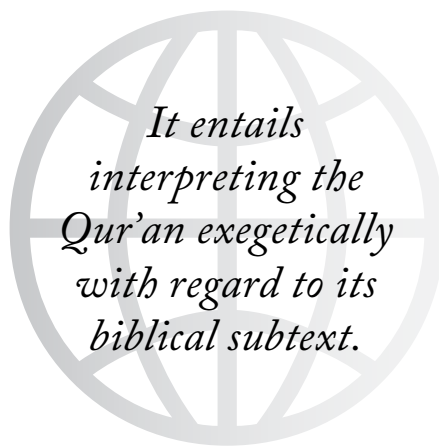
a translation in his mother tongue. He was astonished:

> The first thing I noticed was that there [were] many stories in the Qur'an that were at variance with what I had heard from the *mawlanas,* the Islamic teachers in the mosque. I searched the Qur'an to understand more about Muhammad, but instead, I found Isa, and this disturbed me….
>
> In the Qur'an…I found no titles of honor for Muhammad, but 23 honorable titles that Allah gave to Isa. I saw that Muhammad is not with Allah now, but Isa is in heaven with Allah now. Muhammad is not coming again, but Isa is coming again. Muhammad will not be at the Last Judgment Day,

> but Isa will be at the Last Judgment Day. Muhammad is dead, but Isa is alive. Only four times does the Qur'an speak of Muhammad, and yet 97 times it talks about Isa. Muhammad is not a savior, according to the Qur'an, but Isa's very name means 'Savior.' Muhammad is only a messenger, but Isa is called Ruhallah, the Spirit of Allah.[109]

Amid concluded that either the Qur'an is correct and Isa is the savior, or else the *mawlanas* are right and Muslims should follow Muhammad. He challenged the Islamic teachers to obey the Qur'an and follow Jesus. Some scorned him, but others admitted he was right and counseled him to find out more about Jesus from the Christian community. Amid obtained a Bible, learned more of Christ, and was eventually baptized. Those in his movement demonstrate to other Muslims from the Qur'an that Jesus is the savior and baptize them. Afterwards, they disciple them from the Bible.[110] Though Islamic dogma has misled untold millions of Muslims, when the Quranic testimony to Christ is allowed to speak for itself, many Muslims have come to trust him as savior. Furthermore, the Qur'an repeatedly directs them to follow the guidance of the previous Scriptures.

IV. Muhammadan Prophethood Reconsidered

Like a number of Christian scholars of Islam, I believe there is biblical warrant for considering the possibility of some kind of positive prophetic status for Muhammad. I have shown that biblical and mission theology can allow for this. However, it does entail seeking to interpret the Qur'an exegetically and with regard to its biblical subtext, rather than primarily through the lens of later Islamic tradition. While contemplation of this possibility of prophethood runs counter to the position embraced by most contemporary Christians, it is not a new missiological invention—such voices were heard among Christians at the outset and continue to the present.

The most famous is the patriarch Timothy I who declared,

> Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God

and that "all believers rejoice in the good that he did," teaching the unity of God, driving people away from idolatry, polytheism, and bad works and toward good works.

> Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets.[111]

Timothy even praised Muhammad for his zeal for God with the sword and his preaching monotheism to other peoples; and that this is why God exalted him and gave him sovereignty over the kingdoms of Persia and Rome. It can be argued that Timothy cautiously affirmed Muhammad as a prophet—if the Qur'an is interpreted as not contravening a trinitarian understanding of God (Block: 129-132).

The spirit of Timothy can be seen again in a contemporary Arab evangelical scholar of Islam. Martin Accad advocates authentic engagement with Islam that mediates between traditional apologetic/polemic and liberal syncretistic/existential positions. He calls for a kerygmatic approach to Islam that emphasizes the proclamation of God's full and final revelation in Christ apart from institutional religion. Accad also states:

> But this needs not prevent us from admitting the greatness of Muhammad, and perceiving him, if not as a prophet, nonetheless as a *messenger,* a *rasūl,* who carried an important divine message to his people, leading them away from polytheism and drawing them to the worship of the one God.[112]

Another evangelical scholar of Islam, Bill Musk, likewise seeks to affirm a prophetic role for Muhammad:

*T*he label "directive prophecy" was for those instances where God sovereignly enlists persons outside the covenant to accomplish his purposes.

If "truth" as conveyed by the Bible is primarily about relationship between God and humanity, rather than a collection of propositions to be acknowledged, then surely all statements from Muhammad that reflect the reality of God's self-revelation are prophetic. I do not want to undermine the importance of propositional statements derived from biblical text. But I do want to suggest that those are secondary. After all…the Bible is not an end in itself; it bears witness to Another. Nor did God simply bellow into humans' ears a handful of propositions. "Truth", in its Christian sense, is more subtle, more nuanced, than that. It finds its essence in a Person. Where the Prophet Muhammad gained insight into who that Person is—for example in his conviction, against a polytheistic background, of the oneness of God—his utterances to that effect are truly in the lineage of the biblical prophets. Whether and to what extent Muhammad himself lived by such insights will be evaluated by the One who will evaluate all of us.[113]

An opinion which cannot be easily dismissed is that of the renowned Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck:

> In the past the study of religions was pursued in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of (non-Christian) religions, like Mohammed, were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, and accomplices of the devil. But ever since those religions have become more precisely known, this interpretation has proved untenable; it clashed both with history and psychology. Also among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination of the Logos, a working of God's Spirit (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Ps. 33:6; 104:30; Job 32:8; Eccles. 3:19; Prov. 8:22ff.; Mal. 1:11, 14; John 1:9; Rom. 2:14; Gal. 4:1-3; Acts 14:16, 17; 17:22-30).[114]

Timothy Tennent, Asbury Seminary president and professor of world Christianity, is another prominent evangelical who accedes a positive prophetic role to Muhammad. Tennent embraces Charles Ledit's designation of two kinds of prophecy: "theological" and "directive." The former pointed to, and ceased at, the coming of Christ. Taking a cue from Aquinas, Ledit labeled as "directive prophecy" those instances where God sovereignly enlists persons outside the covenant to accomplish his purposes, such as giving guidance to people or even correcting the covenant people. In this vein, Muhammad united the Arabs and turned them from paganism and idolatry to monotheism and an ordered society, also preparing a potential bridge to the gospel of Christ.[115] Despite the hostilities that later transpired with Jews and Christians, Tennent avers,

> we should not let the whole history of Islam cloud our assessment of Muhammad. If it can be said that God spoke 'directive prophecy' through Cyrus, who announced the end of exile (2 Chron. 36:22; Ezra 1:8), then why could God not have spoken a directive word through Muhammad?[116]

A very recent and extensively argued case for Muhammad as a prophet is made by Anton Wessels, Presbyterian minister and professor emeritus at Amsterdam's Free University. Defining the term, he says:

> A prophet is not someone who predicts the future, who looks into a crystal ball. Rather, a prophet is a seer, someone who points out what an event means, someone who provides insight into what is going on both spiritually and politically. A prophet is an agitator, someone who walks around temple and palace stating his criticism, who rages against the injustices political leaders are committing.

A true prophet does not adopt the drab and colorless language of his society, does not speak the jargon of diplomats, the language of theologians or a priestly caste, or the rigid prose of the business world. He is and remains faithful to the language of the parable. He does not predict history but studies and analyzes it, uncovers and unmasks it.[117]

Wessels presents various lines of evidence for Muhammad as prophet. First, he points out significant parallels between biblical prophets (especially Moses and Elijah) and Muhammad in their commission. Isaiah is instructed to "Cry out." He asks, "What shall I cry out" (Isa. 40:6); Muhammad is called by God to "Recite" (Surah 96:1). Like Isaiah, he asks, "What shall I recite?" (Surah 96:1-5). Commanded to warn others, he dons a cloak, and covers his face with it, like Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:11–13). As with Jeremiah (20:7), Muhammad cannot resist God who is stronger than he; he is compelled to speak (Surah 53:5).[118]

Wessels also notes Muhammad's claim to be a prophet to the "unlettered" *(an-nabi al-ummi)* meant his bringing to those who were without the Scriptures a message that confirmed the previous biblical revelation. In the sense of a "confirmer" he is the "seal of the prophets." Thus, Muhammad "brings the same 'Book,' not the same text but the same message from God, the same guidance for humanity."[119] The *umma* (community) relates to all three communities who claim descent from Abraham and are "People of the Book," each having its unique rite, religion or way of living. Some Jews and Christians accepted Muhammad's message (Surah 28:53–53; 2:121; 29:47; 3:199; 6:114); but now as then, most do not. Wessels maintains that Christians who accept Muhammad as a prophet are not obliged to become "Muslim" in the narrow sense; they are to be "muslim" like Abraham (Surah 3:67), the exemplar for all three communities.

Wessels also seeks to remove some stones of stumbling for Christians.[120]

Many Christians maintain that Muhammad shifted from a positive attitude toward Christians in Mecca (when it was expedient) to a hostile, militant one in Medina (where after acquiring political power he showed his true colors). However, recent research points to a different scenario.

Muhammad was supportive of Christians, including the Byzantines. While preaching in Mecca, he predicted that the Byzantines would lose the nearest part of the land (Palestine/Jerusalem) to the Persians, but in a few years would have victory over them. And when they did, the Muslims[121] would rejoice with them (Surah 30:1–5). However, some 15 years later, after the Byzantine victory over the Persians

Archeological evidence does not support the traditional Islamic narrative.
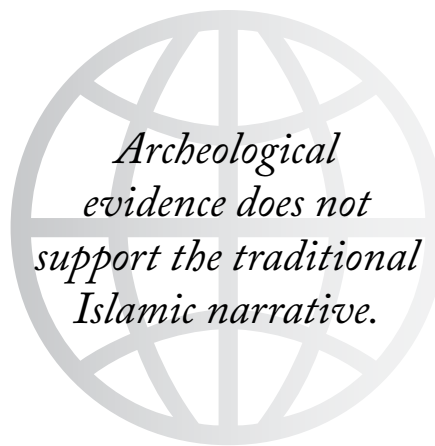
(629/630), Muslim sympathy with the Byzantine cause suddenly turned into sharp hostility.[122] What accounts for this change?

Pursuing political objectives, Emperor Heraclius had appealed to religious sentiments to rally his army—to wrest the true cross from the Persians and bring it back to Jerusalem. After defeating the Persians, he ceremoniously brought the true cross up the Via Dolorosa. Interpreting this act of the Byzantines as idolatry, the Muslims immediately responded by attacking them at Mu'ta. This veneration of the cross provoked the well-documented Muslim antagonism over the symbol of the cross in Syria/Palestine.[123]

However, in contrast to the imperialistic arrogance and cult of the cross of the Byzantines, the Qur'an viewed Christians in Arabia (primarily Monophysite, Syrian Orthodox, Nestorian, and Assyrian) as those "closest in affection" to Muslims, for their priests and monks were not proud (Surah 5:82). Thus, the Qur'an does not view Christians with hostility as a matter of principle, but only when they practice polytheism.[124] And even when violence is justified in the cause of God, the Qur'an infers a measure of culpability and the need to seek forgiveness.[125]

The above examples are sufficient to show that some prominent Christians scholars have recognized or affirmed Muhammad as a prophet, albeit with various meanings of the term. The scholars cited above have no dog in the fight over contextualization and insider movements. Many complex issues are causing them to reassess their stance on Muhammad. Certainly widespread belief in an inherent incompatibility between the Bible and the Qur'an has centuries of support in Muslim-Christian encounter, in religious polemics and apologetics, and in political, military and cultural conflict. But as was discussed above, this was not the case at the outset.

Many factors are calling for a reassessment of Muhammad, such as the critical scrutiny of Islamic historical sources. Study of non-Muslim historical documents and archeological evidence do not support the traditional Islamic narrative. Theories about the origins of the Qur'an and Islam, as well as the Islamic doctrine of abrogation, are being challenged. Textual criticism of the Qur'an, long a taboo—even in academia—is opening possibilities for harmonizing verses that had previously been considered irreconcilable within the Qur'an and with the Bible. This comprehensive project is still in its infancy, and it will likely take many years before these questions are adequately answered. The

results of this scholarly activity will eventually substantiate or weaken the case for consideration of Muhammad as prophet in some capacity.

If Christians were to accept Muhammad as a prophet in one of the ways posited above, then could we affirm this to Muslims without obliging ourselves (in their thinking) to become Muslims? I think that Christ followers could do so and be faithful to biblical authority.

First of all, we acknowledge that prophets were sent both before and after Jesus Christ (as supported by NT passages such as 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Th. 5:19–21). We also establish that every prophet of God, pointed his followers to the way toward God. That being agreed, we would point out that Jesus Christ not only directed people to the way, but claimed that he himself was the way (Jn. 14:6). All of God's prophets (before and after Christ) pointed to him. We can quote Acts 10:43:

> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name,

as well as Jn. 5:39 and Lk. 24:44–47. Although exegetically this reference is to those prophets who preceded Christ, theologically it is true of those who came after him (from NT era prophets until the Elijah of Malachi 4 precedes the Second Advent). We can affirm that Muhammad testified to Christ's uniqueness and greatness, as Parrinder observes:

> The Qur'ān gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past. He is a 'sign', a 'mercy', a 'witness' and an 'example'. He is called by his proper name Jesus, by the titles Messiah (Christ) and Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word and Spirit of God. The Qur'ān gives two accounts of the annunciation and birth of Jesus, and refers to his teachings and healings, and his death and exaltation. Three chapters

*J*esus claimed that he himself was the Way. All of God's prophets (before and after Christ) pointed to him.

or sūras of the Qur'ān are named after references to Jesus (3, 5 and 19); he is mentioned in fifteen sūras and ninety-three verses. Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur'ān with reverence; there is no breath of criticism, for he is the Christ of God.[126]

Christ's being "near stationed to God" (Surah 3:45) has been understood by some Muslims scholars to refer to his supremacy in intercession. Also, Muhammad did in fact testify to the virgin birth (Surahs 3, 19, and 66), but the emphasis of his eschatological proclamation was Christ's Second Advent. And as mentioned before, since Muhammad himself was instructed to ask the People of the Book (Surah 10:94), then so should his followers (Surah 5:68).[127] Those who obey by searching these Scriptures will be pointed to Christ (Jn. 5:39), and this is the primary purpose of prophethood (Ac. 10:43).

Although such consultation may surface theological differences, we should appeal to what the Bible says as our final arbiter, based on the Qur'an's injunction to "let the People of the Gospel judge by that which He has revealed therein" (Surah 5:47). Admittedly, this position conflicts with the mistaken Islamic belief in the infallibility of their prophet, but we can show how the Injīl commands us to apply this same standard to Christian prophets as well (1 Co. 14:29). We need not denigrate Muhammad's character (for even biblical prophets had serious faults). At the same time, allowing for Muhammadan prophethood does not oblige us to embrace Islamic views on it. In this vein, Montgomery Watt advises Christians to acknowledge

> Muhammad as a religious leader through whom God has worked, and

that is tantamount to holding that he is in some sense a prophet. Such a view does not contradict any central Christian belief. It has, however, to be made clear to Muslims that Christians do not believe that all Muhammad's revelations from God were infallible, even though they allow that much of divine truth was revealed to him.[128]

Conclusion

Is Muhammad also among the prophets? This paper has provided theological, missiological, and historical sanction for expanding constricted categories of prophethood to allow Christians to entertain the possibility of Muhammad being other than a false prophet. He may be seen as fulfilling a prophetic role, whether in response to general revelation or special, whether as a preacher or religious leader, whether as an ecstatic or charismatic prophet, or something more. Nevertheless, for those who cannot accept this, perhaps this study will at least reduce their level of indignation toward those who differ with them.

I do not expect a Christian consensus to be reached on this issue—not until he who sits on the throne returns and announces his ultimate and unerring judgment. Sincere and faithful Christians through the centuries have held vastly disparate viewpoints regarding the prophet of Islam—that may not change greatly. A major obstacle is our uncertainty about the actual details of Muhammad's life due to the great lack of personal information about him in the Qur'an and the complexities of the historical sources. Future historical studies may strengthen or weaken the case for Muhammad being regarded as a prophet. The outcome of critical scholarship as to the Qur'an's relationship to the Bible (positive or negative) will also affect thinking. We must also recognize

that our attitudes, opinions, and convictions are influenced by our personal experiences with Muslims, the prejudice of our church, community and culture, as well as the impact of geo-political events on our lives. Differing theological assumptions and understandings will also shape our perspectives.

If nothing else has been achieved, my hope is that this study will engender a degree of humility that recognizes the limits of our knowledge on this issue. I would hope that my presenting positive prophetic possibilities might enable Christians to show Muslims more respect in regard to Muhammad. I also desire to see a lowering of the level of consternation against disciples of Jesus who think positively about Muhammad. Their opinions or convictions should not greatly concern us as long as they render ultimate allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ and biblical authority. May we do the same.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] 1 Samuel 10:11–12 and 19:24. "Is Saul also among the [ecstatic] prophets?" is the meaning according to Ron Youngblood, "1–2 Samuel," in *Deuteronomy–2 Samuel.* Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 627.

[2] Youngblood, 618.

[3] Christians have observed varied practices among Muslim followers of Christ, including:
  a. They do not say the *shahadah.*
  b. They say "there is no god but God," but stop without saying "Muhammad is God's messenger."
  c. They say the full *shahadah,* but add "and Jesus the Messiah is the Word of God and the Spirit of God."
  d. They say the *shahadah* and mean only that Muhammad was a simple messenger and warner.
  e. They say the *shahadah* and assert that Muhammad was a messenger and a prophet for he points to Jesus.
I address this question in detail in "Muslim Followers of Jesus and the Muslim Confession of Faith," in *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus in Diverse Religious Communities,* ed. Harley Talman and John Jay Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, forthcoming 2015).

[4] The first biographer, Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), wrote over a century after Muhammad's death and comes to us only in an abbreviated form edited by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) more than a century after that. Despite his many defenders, some classical Muslim authorities disputed his reliability. Cf. Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam's Obscure Origins* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2012), 87–100; Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 50–56; and Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), chapter 6.

[5] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010); cf. also Part 2 (esp. chapter 6) in his *Emergence of Islam;* also Guilio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

[6] Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices,* Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.

[7] These accounts evidence an attempt at legitimizing Muslim rule of their day by presenting Muhammad's movement as the "Islam" of their time, a religion distinct from Judaism and Christianity, and the earlier expansions as a series of divinely aided religious "Muslim" conquests over "non-Muslims" (Donner, 119–120).

[8] Reynolds and Donner are examples.

[9] C. Jonn Block, *Expanding the Qur'anic Bridge: Historical and Modern Interpretations of the Qur'an in Christian–Muslim Dialogue with Special Attention Paid to Ecumenical Trends* (Minneapolis: Routledge, 2013) seems to be a representative of this.

[10] Spencer summarizes the findings of the revisionists. Their theories and findings are worthy of careful consideration, but carte blanche dismissal of all Islamic sources that lack outside corroboration is an excessively radical approach. Spencer will only grant that Muhammad "as a prophet of the Arabs who taught a vaguely defined monotheism... may have existed," 214.

[11] Dan Gibson, *Qur'anic Geography* (Surrey, BC: Canada, Independent Scholars Press, 2011). See the summary by Jeremy Smyth, "The Mecca Question" at http://searchformecca.com/.

[12] Cf. also Charles Kimball, *Striving Together* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

[13] Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford, UK: One World), 188.

[14] David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 112–118.

[15] For examples, see Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 27, and David Garrison, 118.

[16] Personal conversation in Pasadena, CA, 2004.

[17] Byzantines were Greek Christians whose name came from Byzantium, a Greek city on the European side of the Bosporus Strait. It became the capital of the Eastern part of the Roman empire under Constantine I who renamed it Constantinople. The Greek Christian Empire eventually lost much of its territorial control to the Arab Believers movement (which eventually morphed into Islamic rule).

[18] John of Damascus reacted scathingly to the Islamization of the civil service in Syria. After the Byzantines lost political dominion to Muslim armies, the polemicist Nicetas of Byzantium (c. 842–912) vented the most vitriolic slurs against them and their prophet that he could concoct.

[19] Likely in reaction to the persecution of Muslims during the Reconquest of Spain, Ibn Hazm charged Christians with corrupting the text of Scripture, not just corruption of its meaning.

[20] Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West,* revised edition (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1983).

[21] Kimball, 40.

[22] For example, Surah 92:12-16 strongly warns polytheists.

[23] Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1980), 15.

[24] Cf. Jonathan Culver, "The Ishmaelite Promise and Contextualization among Muslims." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 17(1):62-69, 2000, "The Ishmaelite Promises in the Light of God's Mission: Christian and Muslim Reflections." Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001; chapter 12 in Mark Harlan, *A Model for Theologizing in Arab Muslim Contexts,* Evangelical Missiological Society Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2012); and Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: the Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003).

[25] Robert William Thomson, James Howard-Johnson & Tim Greenwood,

The Armenian History Attributed To Sebeos, Translated Texts For Historians, Vol. 31 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 95–96.

[26] Donner cautions us regarding the complete historicity of the account since Christian polemicists of the time loved to discredit opponents with guilt by association with the Jews, 114. Spencer rejects the historical accuracy due to outside corroboration, but notes the lack of hostility to Jews, 33.

[27] Donner, chapter 2. Donner argues that Muhammad started a reform movement of monotheism that focused on the practice of morality. Much later it became what we recognize today as "Islam." See also Donner's "The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context,* ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

[28] Donner, 69–70, cites Qur'anic support from Surah 46:9, 48:29, 3:199, 3:113–116 and the like.

[29] Donner thinks the Christians who joined this "Believers Movement" were non-Trinitarian Christians, seemingly based on his anti-Trinitarian understanding of certain Qur'anic verses. However, Block gives evidence that these verses were aimed at tri-theism and other heretical Christian views. (See footnote above.)

[30] Spencer, xiv.

[31] Reynolds, *Emergence of Islam,* 160. Cf. also Spencer, xiv, and chapter 2.

[32] Donner, 112. Sometimes the anti-polytheism denunciation "who has no associate" also appeared, but this was not an obstacle for true monotheists.

[33] Donner, 114.

[34] Reference to the work of Petra Jijpesteijn of Leiden University is made by Anton Wessels, *The Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 106. Their self-identity as "emigrants" indicates a mentality of *hijra* with its notions of entering a devout community, striving (even militantly) in the path of God, and adopting a non-nomadic lifestyle (Donner, chapter 2 and p. 134).

[35] Abdul Massih Saadi, "Nascent Islam in the Seventh Century Syriac Sources", in *The Qur'an in its Historical Context,* ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (NY: Routledge, 2008), 217–219. Syriac Christian sources are judged to be more objective than those of the Byzantines who were more polemical due to their direct political and territorial losses to the Arabs.

[36] "Arab" was a linguistic or cultural identity, not a political one. It would be erroneous and anachronistic to suppose an Arab nationalistic political identity existed. Donner states, "There is almost no evidence for the existence of a collective 'Arab' political identity before the Believers created their empire" (218).

[37] Abdul-Masih Saadi, "Nascent Islam in the seventh century Syriac sources," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context,* ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (NY: Routledge, 2008), 217–218.

[38] Donner, 114.

[39] Donner, 190.

[40] All believers were "muslims." Those who were Jews or Christians could still be so identified, but polytheists who forsook idolatry to follow Qur'anic law could only then be called "muslims." Over time, the term "Muslims" began to be applied exclusively to the "new monotheists" (Donner, 72).

[41] Block provides historical evidence that for a century, Christians viewed Muhammad's doctrines in similar terms as they did other branches of Christianity (such as Monophysites and Nestorians) that had alternative Christological views (126). Of course each group regarded all other views as heretical. Reynolds rejects the traditional view of Islam's origins and its sacred text, as does Spencer. Many scholars view "orthodox" Islam as likely representing something that came into existence two or three centuries after Muhammad.

[42] Cf. Martin Accad, "Corruption and/or Misinterpretation of the Bible: The Story of the Islamic Usage of *Tāhrīf,*" *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 24 (2003): 67–97; also Abdullah Saeed, "The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures," *The Muslim World,* Vol.92, No.3/4 (Fall 2002): 419–436.

[43] As a result of this more negative stance toward Christianity, many Christians lay the blame of the bad fruit of the Islamic system upon the root, Muhammad. However, following this logic, the responsibility and blame for the religious system that developed under the Pharisees (that shut the door to Jews who sought to enter kingdom of heaven, Mt. 23:13) should be placed upon the shoulders of Moses. This is certainly not justifiable. Similarly, we would have to blame Peter and Paul (and even Jesus) for what Christianity became in medieval Roman Catholicism.

[44] Reynolds, *Emergence of Islam,* chapter 7.

[45] During the 1st century, Jewish Christians were Torah-observant, distinct from other Jews only by their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Later, they included groups like the Ebionites and Nazarenes. Some followed a Hebrew or Aramaic version of Matthew, others one of several non-canonical Jewish-Christian gospels. Ebionites seem to have denied Christ's pre-existence, but some still accepted the Virgin Birth. By the 4th century, Constantine's persecution drove them to Arabia and beyond.

[46] *The Priest and the Prophet: The Christian Priest, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal's Profound Influence Upon Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam* (Los Angeles: Pen Publishers, 2005). Azzi's demonstration of Waraqa's ties to Jewish Christianity is quite strong. That he was an Ebionite is much less certain, in my opinion. Robert Hoyland is likewise skeptical (*Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam,* vol. 13 [Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997], 28, as cited in Block, 51).

[47] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Muslim-Christian Relations: Questions of a Comparative Religionist" *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 8, 1987, cited in Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: One World, 1997), 191. Such scholars look to a recovery of Hebrew Christian views as a promising contextual Christology for Islam today.

[48] Similarly, John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.

[49] Smith, 20, cited in Zebiri, 190. Although zealous evangelical Christians completely reject any movement deemed heretical, we should realize that devout non-Chalcedonian Christians were similarly classed—not to mention Nestorius, who it seems did not merit that branding. I do not believe that such "heretics" are necessarily infidels (unbelievers)—they may be trusting in Christ but have a different "grasp" of a theological mystery. The same may be true of many evangelical Christians today, who if asked to explain the Trinity would likely give an answer that the ancient church declared heretical. Even theologically sophisticated, Bible believing Christians do not all agree in their understanding of the nature of the Trinity. (Some see social Trinitarians as in conflict with a proper understanding of Nicene orthodoxy).

[50] William Montgomery Watt, "The Christianity Criticized in the Qur'an," *Muslim World* 57:3 (1967):197-201.

[51] Block,126.

[52] Block examines historical and exegetical contexts of Qur'anic criticisms of various Christian identities, 290; cf. also Basetti-Sani.

[53] Block, 281. Block traces the change to a polemical attitude toward Muhammad to John

of Damascus in the 8th century and details the history of deliberate malice in scholarship.

54 Watt, William Montgomery, *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1983), 60–61. I would agree with Watt in this regard, as well with his conclusion that Muhammad is not an exemplar for humanity when judged by modern standards—only the incomparable Christ sets a moral standard that challenges all humans in all times and places.

55 F. Buhl, "Muhammad" in *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam,* ed. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, eds. (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2001), 393–394.

56 Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God among the Unevangelized* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2000), 47.

57 Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 63–65.

58 Little, 115. This faith response to special revelation always has some christological element to it, is always true (though not always fully grasped), and its content regarding what is necessary for salvation is progressively developed.

59 These included Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrystostom, and Gregory of Nazianzus in the Eastern church, and Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great in the West. Even Augustine changed in his views when he saw such phenomena occurring around him (Morton Kelsey, *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976), 97–98.

60 Little, 82. While the Bible was present in Arabia in some non-Arabic languages, such as Syriac, it was the coming of a divine revelation in a "clear, Arabic tongue" (26:195) that gave such great significance to the mission of Muhammad. Stories from Bible translators record the immense difference it makes to tribal peoples when the Scriptures are translated into their heart language, even though they are available to them in another language.

61 Little, 117.

62 I see this prophecy as having had an initial and partial fulfillment at Pentecost (Ac. 2:16–21) and will be fully fulfilled in the last days. The Pentecostal-charismatic movement whose explosive growth claims upward to ½ billion in just one century would lay claim to be a further aspect of fulfillment.

63 This is special revelation, even if not viewed as normative authority for all believers, times and places. Daniel Jones, "Dreams of Christ Awakening Muslims to Newfound Faith," *World Pulse* 30, no. 5 (March 1995):4–5; Rick Kronk, *Dreams*

and Visions: Muslims' Miraculous Journey to Jesus (San Giovanni Teatino, Italy: Destiny Image, 2010); Tom Doyle, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 223; Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims Become Christians* (East Sussex, UK: Monarch, 1999).

64 Though my seminary and church background denied this possibility, my views later changed through my experiences with individuals who are so gifted, and through the writings of Carson, Grudem and Deere. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), and Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks Today through Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1996).

65 Carson 1987, 94–98.

66 Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts,* revised ed. (Ventura, CA: Venture Books, 1984), 9–25; cf. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 373, comments on Acts 17:23.

67 *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 318.

68 Johan H. Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 123.

69 Some scholars believe the "night of power" (Surah 97:1–5) is actually a reference to Christmas night, based on the similar vocabulary used in the Qur'an and the nativity narratives (Spencer, 183–185).

70 J. H. Bavinck, 124-126.

71 J. H. Bavinck, 126.

72 Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 84.

73 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 4–5.

74 Rahman, 5.

75 Cragg, 95.

76 Block takes a different view, thinking "unscriptured" may simply refer to the fact that Muhammad was not a known scholar like his uncle Waraqa, as the context gives the impression of one who is an "amateur" or "under-educated." This is influenced by his belief that "much of the Scripture already existed at least orally in Arabic, and textually in Karshuni in Muhammad's time. The Theopaschite [affirming that God can suffer] formula was debated by Arab Bishops,

the Ghassanids had bishops since the 4th century, the Nicene creed was in Arabic, and there are Christian Arabic inscriptions from at least the 5th century. The text may have been in Syriac, but the debates were in Arabic" (personal conversation, March 2013).

77 Cragg, 86–87.

78 Cragg, 97.

79 Gottfried Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973), 37. Some key characteristics of modern messianic movements are reminiscent of Islam: their seeking to present a holistic view of life with religion at its center, strength of community, simplicity of message, and establishing a new fellowship that provides security and a new identity with meaning.

80 Oosterwal, 9.

81 David Shank, "William Wadé Harris," in *Mission Legacies,* ed. Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote, Norman A. Horner, and James M. Phillips (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 158. David Shank further describes Harris' prophetic ministry: "Accompanied by two women disciples—excellent singers playing calabash rattles—he visited village after village, calling the coastal people to abandon and destroy their 'fetishes,' to turn to the one true and living God, to be baptized and forgiven by the Savior; he then taught them to follow the commandments of God, to live in peace, and organized them for prayer and worship of God in their own languages, music, and dance, to await the 'white man with the Book' and the new times that were to come" (155). Harris declared himself God's prophet and was mightily used of God like no other person in West Africa in the conversion of thousands to Christ. Nevertheless, we see error in some of his prophetic views (155–165).

82 Shank, 155.

83 Casely Hayford, in *William Waddy Harris,* 16-17, n.d. Quoted in David Shank, "William Wadé Harris," in *Mission Legacies,* ed. Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote, Norman A. Horner, and James M. Phillips (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 159.

84 Lamen Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 59.

85 Founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism).

86 Oosterwal, 13–15.

87 Oosterwal, 21.

88 Oosterwal, 28.

89 Oosterwal, 34–35.

[90] Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 1. We should note that Hoekema classified the Seventh-Day Adventists as a cult, along with Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science; whereas, many like myself, count the Adventists as fellow evangelical believers (although I seriously differ regarding their theology of hell). This should serve to illustrate the need for spiritual sophistication that does not just apply rigid categories and labels to an individual, group, or prophet.

[91] I mean apart from the writings in the canon of Scripture. Some mistakes in Agabus' prophetic understanding (Ac. 21:10–11) are noted by Carson (1987:97–99). Recall how even an apostle, Peter, erred in his practical theology at Antioch (Gal. 2).

[92] Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making: A Short Introduction to the History of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1935, reprint 1986), 31.

[93] Oosterwal, 30.

[94] Little, 119.

[95] Paul G. Hiebert, "The Category 'Christian' in the Mission Task," *International Review of Mission* 72(3): 1983: 421–427.

[96] Ibid.

[97] This is an illustrative example, not necessarily expressing my view on when they were saved. Admittedly, some would see differences from our present age due to transitional and dispensational distinctions.

[98] Charles Kraft, "Contextualization in Three Dimensions," inaugural lecture given at his installation as Sun Hee Kwak Professor of Anthropology and Intercultural Communication Chair, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 20, 1999.

[99] Cf. Surahs 2:285, 4:136, 163, 5:44–48, 11:17, 40:69–72, and 42:15.

[100] See C. Jonn Block's work for likely explanations, and Basetti-Sani (1977) for possible ones.

[101] Although the Qur'an's portrayal of Christ is incomplete and inadequate apart from the Injil, the same could also be said of the apostle Paul. A religiously observant Jew who follows Jesus as Messiah pointed out to me that an abridged New Testament volume called simply "The Epistles" that contained only Paul's writings would seem to be somewhat scattered and incomplete, just like the Qu'ran does to us. From his viewpoint, the Christian overemphasis on Paul's writings to the Greeks and Romans results in our giving greater authority to Paul's teachings about Jesus than to Jesus himself. Practically speaking, Paul becomes the greatest and final messenger, like Muhammad is in Islam, due to Islam's overemphasizing his writings. (Of course, the latter is incomparably more adverse due to Muslim neglect or rejection of the Gospels.) Regardless of the degree to which one agrees with his assessment of Gentile Christianity's overemphasis on Paul, his incompleteness analogy of the Qur'an and the Epistles is helpful.

[102] Although essential elements of gospel teaching are absent from the Qur'an, some listeners may have been acquainted with it from the varied Christian groups that formed the original context (as some recent scholars assert). In any case, I understand the Qur'an to demand that Muslims believe in and follow the Injil.

[103] The term "cargo-cults" refers to groups in Oceania that splintered off from the fruit of European missionary efforts because the missionaries hid the secrets for obtaining the "cargo" of European material wealth (Mircea Eliade, "'Cargo-cults' and Cosmic Regeneration," in *Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements,* ed. Sylvia Thrupp (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1970), 122–125.

[104] Eliade, 143.

[105] Muhammad's accusation against the Jews (and Christians?) of *taḥrīf* ("corruption" of the Word of God) did not charge them with changing the written text of Scripture, but with concealing the truth (Surah 3:71; 6:92), distorting its meaning as they read it aloud (3:78), composing their own texts and passing them off as Scripture (2:79), and forgetting the covenant (5:14, 15). On the contrary, he insists that no one can "change the words of God" (10:64, 6:34).

[106] I would side with those who hold that the NT distinguishes between these original Apostles who authored infallible authoritative revelation and those who are apostles merely as a spiritual gift, empowered to be sent as missionaries or pioneers of new ministries.

[107] For an analysis of the various views on how Christ fulfilled the Law see Donald A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Matthew, Mark, Luke. Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 141–145.

[108] I am here presupposing an initial, partial, and progressive view of kingdom fulfillment at Christ's first coming, as advocated by progressive dispensationalists writers like Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: IL: BridgePoint, 1993) and Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999). This approach has considerable commonality with George Eldon Ladd's "already, not yet" view of the kingdom of God (*The Gospel of the Kingdom,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959). Moreover, even some amillennial covenant theologians might not disagree greatly with much of this basic interpretive framework.

[109] Garrison, 117–118.

[110] Garrison, 118.

[111] Timothy I, "Timothy's Apology for Christianity," trans. A. Mingana, in *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History.* Vol. 2, ed. Jean-Marie Gaudeul, pp. 234–245 (Rome: Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, 1984), 242.

[112] Martin Accad, "Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: a Kerygmatic Approach," in *Toward Respectful Understanding & Witness among Muslims,* Evelyne A. Reisacher ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 39.

[113] Bill A. Musk, *Kissing Cousins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 82.

[114] *Reformed Dogmatics,* 318. Others in line with Bavinck cite biblical support for Spirit induced prophecy outside the biblical canon but which is not necessarily infallible. The NT gift of prophecy (unlike NT apostleship) was not necessarily infallible; for 1 Cor. 14:29–31 and I Thes. 5:19–21 require that the pronouncements of prophets be sifted, not necessarily accepted or rejected in toto. Cf. Donald A Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 94–98; also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 53). Parallels can be seen in church and mission history. In West Africa the charismatic prophet William Harris claimed to have been called by God to be a prophet through a vision. Western missionaries testified to the spectacular impact of his ministry and considered it to be of God, but some of his prophetic pronouncements missed the mark. Cf. Mark Harlan, *A Model for Theologizing in Arab Muslim Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2012), chapter 11.

[115] Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 43–44.

[116] Ibid., 44. Tennent insists that such an affirmation does not require Christians to accept Islamic ideas of Muhammad's infallibility or his being the final prophet. Moreover, it does not obviate the need of Muslims for the gospel of Christ for salvation.

[117] Anton Wessels, *The Torah, The Gospel and the Qur'an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 32.

[118] Wessels, 42–43.

[119] Wessels, 53.

[120] Regarding some alleged errors in the Qur'an, such as its reference to Haman as a minister of Pharoah (29:29), Wessels explains that this is not a historical assertion, but rather a spiritual one. Just as the Bible often links motifs to powers of different eras that are opposed to God, so Haman is connected to Pharoah, the enemy of God's people. In the Qur'an these two, like Korah, are arrogant (Wessels, 156). Also, he believes Jesus is the Mahdi (197).

[121] These "Muslims" or "Believers" likely included Christians and Jews, though many scholars would disagree.

[122] Wessels, 226–227.

[123] David Cook, "Why Did Muhammad Attack the Byzantines?" in *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Detractors, Definitions,* ed. Joseph Morrison Skelly (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security, 2010), 28. Given debates over chronology, Cook says that it is possible that the attack at Tabuk in 631 could have been the Muslim reaction to this veneration of the True Cross (31).

[124] Wessels, 227–228. He cites other indications of positive attitudes toward other "People of the Book." In 632 Muhammad received a Christian delegation from southern Arabic to Medina and allowed them to pray in his mosque. His treaty with them and with Jews of the Hijaz was later ignored by his later successor, Umar. Yet even under Mu'awiya, the first Umayyid ruler, the police force in Medina was comprised of 200 Christians and for many years there was a cemetery for Christians and Jews in Mecca (255–256).

[125] Wessels contrasts the Qur'an's attitude toward conquest to the later Islamic view: "It is incorrect to understand the use of the word *fath* [success] in Muhammad's time in its later sense of 'conquest.'…it is obvious, according to the Qur'an, that the attainment of the conquest and victory and the use of violence, however minor, entail dirty hands. That is why forgiveness must be continually sought: 'When God's help *(nasr)* comes, and success (fath), and you [Muhammad] see the people entering the religion of God in droves, then praise the glory of your Lord and ask him forgiveness.' (Q. 110:1-3; cf. Q. 40:55; 71:10)," 252.

[126] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Sheldon Press, 1965), 16; cf. also Donald R. Rickards, "A Study of the Quranic References to Isa in Light of the Tafsir and Hadith." Ph.D. dissertation, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1969.

[127] "People of the Book" in this instance refers to Muslims since "what was revealed to you by your Lord" refers to the Qur'an. They are obliged to uphold the Tawrah and Injil as well.

[128] Watt, William Montgomery, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991), 148, cited in Block, 241.

Towards a Theology of Islam:
A Response to Harley Talman's "Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets?"

by Martin Accad

Martin Accad is the third generation of a family deeply involved in building genuine loving relationships with Muslims, sharing the life and call of Jesus with them. In 2001, he obtained a PhD in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations from Oxford University. Accad currently holds faculty appointments in Islamic Studies at both the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. He directs the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies at ABTS (since 2003), an annual conference on the Middle East and Islam, and the Institute's new Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies.

In this article, Harley Talman is dealing with what I believe to be one of the most important topics of Christian-Muslim relations today. It should therefore not be viewed as some exercise in intellectual gymnastics. Evangelicals have been divided over three major issues during the last decade: (1) the legitimacy for Muslims who become followers of Jesus to remain largely within their community (the so-called "Insider Movement(s)," often *domesticized* as "IM"); (2) the legitimacy of highly-contextualized, reader-driven Bible translations for a Muslim audience; and (3) the legitimacy of dialogue as a complementary approach to Christian mission to Muslims.

Generally, I have observed that evangelicals are quite consistent in being either *supportive* of all three issues, or systematically *against* them. What is striking is that despite the amount of ink already spilled on these questions, proponents on both sides seem to have a very hard time defining the terms of the conversation. I have arrived at the conviction that the essence of this disagreement is completely unrelated to the extent of one's motivation for God's mission, or the amount of one's experience in ministry, or the technical aptitude and effectiveness of one's missional methodology. Indeed, most people on either side of the spectrum have unquestionable pedigrees as missionaries, and most have a passion for mission that is next to blameless. That is what makes these disagreements and splits even sadder.

Instead, I believe that at the heart of this unfortunate divide is one's "theology of Islam." It is easy to notice that those evangelicals who lean towards being proponents of the three issues cited above (i.e., insider movements, reader-driven Bible translations, and dialogue) are also those who believe that there are some aspects of Islam's religious culture that are redeemable, whereas opponents of the three issues above tend to have a more demonizing view of Islam, seeing next to nothing redeemable in the entire phenomenon.

Very little has been done historically on the Christian side to develop a mature theological discourse on Islam, beyond the first couple of centuries when Islam

was still taking shape. As indicated by Talman, there is strong evidence that Islam was initially viewed by Eastern Christians as some sort of variant of Christianity. This likely reflected Islam's self-perception in those early days as well. Given the strong Qur'anic affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it probably took a while before Islam was able confidently to assert itself as an independent religion separate from Christianity and Judaism. Thus, in the records of the encounters between Patriarch John of Sedreh and a Muslim prince (c. 644 AD), in the writings of John of Damascus (early 8th century), or in Patriarch Timothy I's record of his encounter with the Caliph al-Mahdi (c. 750 AD)—all mentioned by Talman—we find an attempt at making sense of Islam within a Christian worldview. There we find a "Christian theology of Islam" of sorts.

Within the Byzantine Empire, on the other hand, where direct contact with Muslims was minimal besides the relationship of political and military enemies, Byzantine Christians such as Nicetas of Byzantium (c. 842–912) or George Hamartolos (9th century) developed an extremely harsh and exclusivist polemical discourse on Islam rather than any real "theology." And it is this very harsh Byzantine view that has generally had a significant impact on medieval Europe and hence on the development of the Western view. Alternatively, the Eastern attempts at theologizing, which were possible up until the end of the first millennium, became far more difficult to sustain after Islam became the unchallenged ruler in the region, and after the demographics also turned decidedly in its favor.

All this to say that Talman's attempt at developing what I see as a "Christian and biblical theology of Muhammad" is highly commendable. I hope that this will give rise to a constructive and creative conversation, not just about Muhammad, but also about the Qur'an, about Islam's and Muslims' view of God (Miroslav Volf's *Allah: A Christian*

Response was a great beginning), their understanding of sin and salvation, etc.

This is quite a different endeavor to the historic approaches of comparative religions or comparative theology. It consists in studying Islam's theology in and of itself, not solely for the purpose of *understanding* Islam (that has been the work of Islamicists), nor simply for the purpose of affirming Christian superiority (that has often been the purpose of "comparative religions" as well as of polemical and apologetic missions). What we need today, however, is to develop a "Christian and biblical theology of Islam." This would be based on a solid scientific understanding of Islam, and it would also (at least in evangelical circles) have a strong concern for the mission of

> *This is quite different than the historic approaches of comparative religions or comparative theology.*

God. But it would also take the conversation a number of steps further.

Developing a "Christian and biblical theology of Islam" would consist in making sense of the various dimensions of the Islamic *phenomenon* within the framework of faithful biblical Christianity. The purpose of such an endeavor would be neither to discredit Islam, nor to eliminate the theological differences between Islam and Christianity. Rather, from an evangelical perspective, it would aim at continuing to carry out our calling to fulfill the mission of God in communities where Christians and Muslims live side by side. But we are called today to do this on new foundations of understanding that would

increase creative conversations, trigger renewed and honest inquiry, and challenge the historic situation of conflict between both communities.

This is particularly important in the current situation because interreligious conflict is sharply on the rise. So for Christians to try and make sense of Islam, honestly, boldly, scientifically, and humbly, is not a theoretical matter to be taken up in ivory towers. If we do not take this endeavor seriously, we will continue to recycle and rehash (as we increasingly are doing) the insults that we have hurled at each other and that are well attested to in historical texts. The outcome of this approach is also well documented in our historical records: war in the name of religion.

As with any topic as controversial as this one, we should be careful not to judge trailblazers like Harley Talman too quickly. We must ensure that we do justice to the limitations and boundaries he has put upon himself. He makes it clear from the beginning that he does "not view any kind of Islam as an alternative way of salvation apart from personal faith in Christ." Talman clarifies another significant limitation to his endeavor in the conclusion of his article:

> This paper has provided theological, missiological, and historical sanction for expanding constricted categories of prophethood to allow Christians to entertain *the possibility of Muhammad being other than a false prophet. (emphasis* mine)

It is clear that Talman is aware of the potentially inflammatory nature of his exercise, and in these words he therefore sets humble goals for his work at this point. Though he pushes the usual boundaries of evangelical thinking on prophethood, particularly Muhammad's, he seems keen to affirm that he is still within the boundaries of predecessors such as Kenneth Crag, Bill Musk, Geoffrey Parrinder or William Montgomery Watt in their view of Muhammad; and he works within the boundaries of biblical prophethood as

defined by recognized Bible scholars like Donald Carson, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Wayne Grudem.

One significant contribution that Talman makes is that he takes seriously contemporary research on Islamic origins. Many Christian polemicists against Islam make the mistake of basing all of their attacks on the traditional Muslim narrative about Islamic origins. So, for instance, some of the recent satirical descriptions of Muhammad as a demon-possessed man are based on testimonies about convulsions and trances that he experienced while receiving revelations (as attested in the *hadith*, the Muslim traditions). But strong evidence has been advanced by "revisionist" scholars (often secularists without a religious axe to grind) that question the historical reliability of such accounts, which may have been constructed up to a couple of centuries later to match the popular expectations of the day with regards to Arabian charismatic figures. Even the critical scholars of the late nineteenth

*D*espite Talman's conciliatory approach to Muhammad and Islam, his conclusions are by no means "orthodox" from a Muslim perspective.

and the first half of the twentieth century (the so-called "orientalists") based their study of Islam largely on an acceptance of the reliability of Muslim traditions. This uncritical acceptance has begun to be rectified by the seminal work on the *hadith* undertaken by the likes of Wansbrough, Schacht, Crone, Cook, and others, and recently has been made more accessible by both Gabriel S. Reynolds *(The Emergence of Islam)* and Daniel Brown *(A New Introduction to Islam).*

The honest reader of this article will quickly notice that, despite Talman's conciliatory approach to Muhammad and Islam, his conclusions are by no means "orthodox" or "mainstream" from a Muslim perspective. So by suggesting that there may be some space in the Christian biblical worldview to consider Muhammad as *in some ways* a prophet, the

author is not conceding much at all, and certainly not for the purpose of "pleasing" Muslims. Harley Talman's work and conclusions are indeed more useful for Christians who are trying to make sense of Islam in their desire to reach Muslims with the gospel, than for Muslims who are trying to convince Christians about Muhammad's prophethood. In this sense, Talman's work—and the continuing conversation which I hope his article will provoke—should be viewed as belonging to the field of missiology *par excellence,* and only in a secondary degree to that of comparative religions or Islamic studies. But it also reveals clearly that those who wish to engage in this conversation in any helpful way will need to be well read in Islamic studies, as well as in Christian theology, and in the fields of philosophy and theology of religion. **IJFM**

William Carey Library

The Road to Bau and the Autobiography of Joeli Bulu

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor

English missionary John Hunt and Tongan missionary Joeli Bulu served in the Fiji islands in the 1840s. Their lives were intertwined as they faced the social issues of island warfare, cannibalism, and the ills brought to the Pacific by traders and those involved in the labor trade. In this fascinating two-volume book Alan Tippett first provides the biography of Hunt, then together with Tomasi Kanailagi gives us the thoroughly researched and annotated autobiography of Joeli Bulu.

Doug Priest, PhD, served as a missionary for seventeen years in Kenya, Tanzania, and Singapore. While at Fuller Theological Seminary, Priest was student of and an assistant to Alan Tippett. Like his mentor, Priest has an anthropology degree from the University of Oregon. He is the executive director of CMF International.

List Price $17.99 • **Our Price $14.39**

ISBN: 978-0-87808-476-0 *Alan Tippett (Author), Doug Priest (Editor)*
WCL | Pages 224 | Paperback 2013
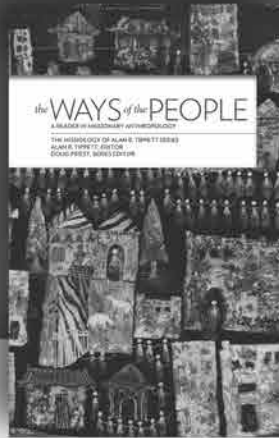
The Ways of the People

A Reader in Missionary Anthropology

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor

Missionaries and anthropologists have a tenuous relationship. While often critical of missionaries, anthropologists are indebted to them for linguistic and cultural data as well as hospitality and introductions into the local community. In *The Ways of the People,* Alan Tippett provides a critical history of missionary anthropology and brings together a superb reader of seminal anthropological contributions from missionaries Edwin Smith, R. H. Codrington, Lorimer Fison, Diedrich Westermann, Henri Junod, and many more.

List Price $39.99 • **Our Price $31.99**

ISBN: 978-0-87808-467-8 *Alan Tippett (Author), Doug Priest (Editor)*
WCL | Pages 702 | Paperback 2013
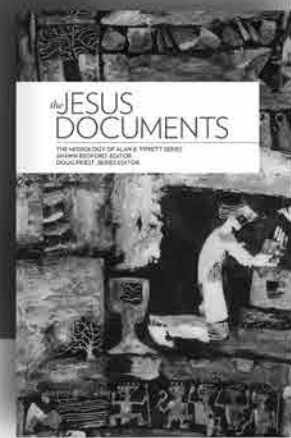
The Jesus Documents

Alan Tippett, Author | Doug Priest, Editor
Shawn Redford, Editor

Throughout *The Jesus Documents*, Alan Tippett's distinguished skills in missiology and anthropology demonstrate that biblical studies and cultural anthropology are disciplines that must be integrated for holistic biblical understanding. Tippett opens our eyes to the intentional missional nature of all four Gospels, showing that they "were the fruit of the Christian mission itself, the proof that the apostles obeyed the Great Commission" as they "worked out their techniques for cross-cultural missionary communication" with cultural sensitivity.

Shawn Redford, PhD, is a specialist in missiological hermeneutics. He has taught Biblical Theology of Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary and the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology for over ten years. He currently serves in Kenya with CMF International and is the founder of the Mission Institute East Africa.

List Price $17.99 • **Our Price $14.39**

ISBN: 978-0-87808-466-1 *Alan Tippett (Author), Doug Priest (Editor), Shawn Redford (Editor)*
WCL | Pages 120 | Paperback 2012

From Prophethood to the Gospel:
Talking to Folk Muslims about Jesus

by Perry Pennington

For twelve years Perry Pennington worked among South Asian Muslims in church planting, discipleship, and theological education. He holds a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary, a Master of Urban Education from Union University, and a Doctor of Ministry in Missions from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He currently teaches in inner-city Memphis.

My own approach to communicating the gospel to South Asian Muslims began in a simple conversation late one evening with my neighbor, Dervesh. He is a Sufi teacher who, on that occasion, began to explain to me the logic of Sufi prayer. He laid out how the prayers of folk Muslims seek blessing from God through the intercessory prayers of Sufi saints. He also explained that the efficacy of those prayers is related directly to the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad. Prophethood, blessing and the hope for a better life were themes he wove together into a portrait of his local Muslim world. His thinking was "prophetological"[1] in the way he pictured these core Muslim concerns, and that picture has shaped my perception of how biblical themes of prophethood and blessing should take a primary place in our presentation of the gospel to South Asian folk Muslims.

Missiological discussions about Islam often address Islam as a whole, presenting it as a monolithic system, and ignore the cultural and religious diversity within the Muslim world. These discussions fail to take account of the folk Islam that influences most Muslims,[2] or if they do recognize the place of folk Islam, they give it only a token of the attention it deserves in any strategic deliberation over contextualizing the gospel. If contextualization is to be truly effective in bringing the truth of the gospel to bear on the central difficulties and concerns for South Asian Muslims, then I believe we must focus on the unique perspective of folk Islam. So, let me first introduce what I see as the source and purpose of contextualization. I want this to be clear before I proceed to develop the key cultural concerns of blessing and prophethood in this particular context. These cultural themes are then the basis of my proposal for a theological contextualization of the gospel for South Asian folk Muslims.

The Gospel from a Muslim Perspective

The source of the gospel message is the saving activity of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The theological work we do in communicating

the gospel's message in new cultural settings is at the heart of this process we call contextualization. The contextualization of this message is to find a biblical and culturally relevant way to introduce Jesus, explain the reason for and the result of his death, and call for a response.

Missionaries have sometimes approached the task of contextualizing the gospel for Muslims through a process of theological bridge building. In "bridge-based" contextualization, areas of similarity between Islam and the Christian faith are sought. Then a theological bridge is built from that area of commonality to the gospel. It is hoped that by framing the presentation of the gospel in terms of an element within Islam (one which does not contradict, but rather corresponds to Christian faith) the gospel will then be more easily understood and accepted. Shared bodies of beliefs make such efforts possible.[3] Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians promotes mutual understanding, dialogue, friendship building, and even the sharing of the gospel. Yet the purpose of contextualization is not merely to increase the palatability of the gospel, but to focus on heightening the comprehensibility of the gospel in a particular cultural context. If an audience clearly comprehends the message of the gospel but sees in it only the "offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11),[4] this may be recognized as an effective contextualization of the gospel, because the message was clearly understood.

The strength of bridge-building contextualization is that it uses something familiar to the audience to explain the gospel. The weakness of this approach is that the aspect of the local culture being used as a bridge may or may not turn out to be an important part of that culture. This is especially true when a cultural outsider is choosing what cultural aspect or truth might become the bridge. If a peripheral cultural element were selected for use in contextualization, then the

gospel message would be unhelpfully associated with something of only minor importance in that culture. Frankly, this is the situation when the theological theme of sacrifice is used as the cornerstone for any presentation of the gospel to folk Muslims in South Asia. The offering of an animal sacrifice is made each year by South Asian folk Muslims, but that act of sacrifice is of relatively minor importance in their culture. Sacrifice is not viewed as either atoning or saving, so by framing the gospel in terms of sacrifice (or any other familiar term of minor importance), the message of the gospel may actually be obscured.

In contrast to "bridge-building" contextualization, I believe a better contextualization of the gospel begins

The search for blessing is the primary driving concern.

by identifying the very deepest fears, hopes, and frustrations of a Muslim society. Contextualization seeks to squarely address those pressing cultural concerns with relevant themes from the Bible that will illuminate the gospel. To locate the core concerns and fears within a culture is to discover what is considered important in that context. Attempts to address and solve these deepest cultural concerns, fears, and hopes are like a powerful engine that generates enormous amounts of energy.[5] When the gospel is presented in a way that connects with these core concerns, the power already being produced by a recipient cultural "engine" promotes an investigation of the gospel as a potential solution. Because this

approach to contextualization focuses on major concerns and needs, the gospel will be expressed in terms of an issue or theme that is of vital importance to the Muslim society, leading to clarity and comprehensibility.

Using the contextualization strategy described above, this article will seek to answer certain questions: What are the central concerns, fears, and hopes of South Asian folk Muslims? Which biblical themes correspond to and most directly address those concerns? And are those biblical themes also sufficient to explain the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin? How may those themes be used to present the gospel?

Blessing and Prophethood in Folk Islam

Understanding the worldview of folk Muslims is essential for developing an appropriate theology for their context. As I will show below, the search for blessing is the primary driving concern in the worldview of South Asian folk Muslims. In addition, prophethood is the principal means of grace through which blessing is distributed among them. For South Asian Muslims, therefore, prophethood and blessing are central concerns of daily life.

For most South Asian Muslims, daily life is a persistent struggle. The Indian government appointed a commission to study the socioeconomic conditions of the Muslim community, which numbers over 150 million in India. The Sachar Commission reported that their analysis

> shows that while there is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states…the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development.[6]

The indicators studied included educational, economic, and employment conditions, bank credit accessibility, access to social and physical infrastructure, poverty, standard of living,

access to government employment, and access to government affirmative action. The difficulty of daily life for most Muslims in India creates a deep need for a practical framework for understanding, explaining, and solving life's difficulties.

In their folk religious contexts, doctrine and orthodoxy take a back seat to a more pragmatic response to the immediate concerns of daily life.[7] Folk religionists generally assume that blessing may be sought that might provide a solution to any of life's difficulties. The worldview of South Asian folk Muslims is deeply concerned with obtaining blessings of various kinds through the help of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, this blessing might possibly be the ultimate concern and aspiration of folk Muslims in South Asia. I would like to examine three categories of blessing which South Asian folk Muslims wish to obtain: general well being, salvation, and social status.

Seeking Blessing in Folk Islam

All Muslims seek blessing from God. But unlike orthodox Muslims, folk Muslims seek blessing not only through the observance of orthodox Islamic practices, but also through unorthodox "magical" means. Many rituals of South Asian folk Muslims are simply animistic practices that have been adapted and given an Islamic veneer. Brown writes,

> Folk Muslims…tend to be…concerned with averting demons and evil and with gaining supernatural favors, and they view rituals, both Islamic and traditional, as means to these ends.[8]

More specifically, they believe that blessing can be obtained from places or objects with a connection to the prophets. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* states:

> God can implant an emanation of *baraka* [blessing] in the person of his prophets and saints: Muhammad and his descendants are especially endowed therewith. These sacred personages, in their turn, may communicate the effluvia of their supernatural

potential to ordinary men, either during their lifetime or after their death, the manner of transmission being greatly varied, sometimes strange.[9]

Practitioners of folk Islam gain legitimacy in transmitting blessing by relying on Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Unlike Sufism, which is considered orthodox, folk Islam is viewed as unorthodox because of the way it mixes orthodox belief and ritual with animistic practices. In the history of Islam in South Asia, local Sufi mystics received special respect, especially from folk Muslims. They continue to be venerated as those who are especially close to God, and a genuine Sufi is considered a channel of blessing from God. Sufis are visited regularly by people who need advice, healing, or even help with getting their children to go to sleep at night. Sufis belong to Sufi "orders" or brotherhoods, which should be distinguished from Christian monastic orders, as they represent certain schools of thought handed down by Sufi masters who each have taught their mystical approach to God according to a particular pattern.[10] All of the Sufi orders trace their spiritual lineage back to Muhammad through a chain of succession that continues to the present day.[11]

As I mentioned in my opening remarks about my former neighbor, Dervesh, the efficacy of Sufi prayers is directly related to the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad. Dervesh also introduced me to an interesting logic regarding Sufi intercession: According to him, for every work there is an accompanying *vasila* (means). For instance, the *vasila* for reading is eyeglasses; for writing, a pencil; for drinking, a glass. Prayer, he made clear, also requires a *vasila*. "Which *vasila* do you use when you pray?" I asked

him. Dervesh explained that he prayed in the name of (with the *vasila* of) all the prophets and holy books. *Vasilas* are required in prayer, Dervesh said, because prayer is talking to God, who is mighty and powerful. He is full of blessing, but his power is so great that direct contact with him is fraught with danger. God, he continued, is like an electricity-generating power plant. It produces such a powerful form of electricity that it is useless for ordinary household items like radios, for its power would destroy them if connected directly to them. No one powers a radio directly at the power-generating plant. Instead, the electricity is taken from the generating plant to an electrical grid. From there, the electricity goes to a transformer, after which it is sent into homes. Once the safe electricity has been sent into the home, the radio may be used without fear. In prayer, Dervesh concluded, God is like the generating station, the prophets, like the grid station, and Sufis, like the transformer. They are a conduit for the blessing and power of God that flows from them to their followers in a manageable form. Regular people are the radio itself. They can pray for and experience God's power and blessing, but only through the mediation of prophetic figures.

Dervesh prays according to "all the prophets and all the holy books," including Jesus. Even this kind of prayer, however, relies on the help of Muhammad. He understands that Islam teaches that the prophets themselves, including Jesus, depend on Muhammad in prayer. Muslim tradition tells us that the prophets prayed according to the *vasila* of Muhammad, from the time of Adam.[12] Because Muhammad is the "point of 'association' within Islam between God and the human world,"[13] every *vasila* in South Asian

Dervesh prays according to "all the prophets and all the holy books," including Jesus. Even this kind of prayer relies on the help of Muhammad.

folk Islam leads back to Muhammad. Receiving blessing from God, including having prayers heard and answered, is a *prophetological* process in the folk Islam of South Asia.

Securing One's General Well-Being

Folk Muslims in South Asia display the typical pattern of occasionally visiting the *dargah* (tomb) of a Sufi saint, where they may pray and ask the saint to intercede for them. They hope that the saint will carry their petition forward by speaking to his own masters and guides in the school of Sufism, in a chain reaching back to Muhammad, who can then intercede with God for them. The physical relic of the saint is venerated because of its perceived spiritual connection to Muhammad. Like other folk Muslim practices in South Asia, *dargah* worship is a means of obtaining blessing, via intermediaries, through the ultimate source of help, the Prophet Muhammad. *Vasila* is the operative concept in understanding how South Asian folk Muslims seek to obtain spiritual power and blessing through a spiritual networking of these practices.

Shi'a Veneration

In South Asia, Shi'a and Sunni folk Muslims share the operative concept of *vasila,* though the particular *vasilas* used may be different. On one visit to the local *imambara* (e.g., a congregation hall used by Shi'a Muslims for the annual festival commemorating the martyrdom of Hussain, son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) the cleric who gave me a tour showed me all of the objects that are used there as *vasilas* in seeking blessing. These particular objects are defined by the Shi'a belief that Muhammad's physical descendants (through Hussain) are his only true successors as leaders of the Muslim community, so the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussain (son of Ali) is an important occasion for obtaining blessing through symbolic objects. For example, there is a model of the tomb of Imam Hussain.

Not everyone, he told me, can visit the tomb of Imam Hussain in person, so pious Shi'as are allowed to construct a model of the tomb. Visiting the model of the tomb of Hussain generates just as much blessing as making a pilgrimage to the actual tomb. The power for this source of blessing for Shi'as is that Muhammad's true succession, the lineage of Ali and Hussain, provides the valid conduit of blessing.

Another example involves the scene of Hussain's martyrdom, that place where he was carried into battle on a white horse named Zuljanah, whose likeness is venerated in picture form in the *imambara.* Around the corner from the *imambara* is a courtyard containing

The logic of salvation has everything to do with one's relation to the Prophet.
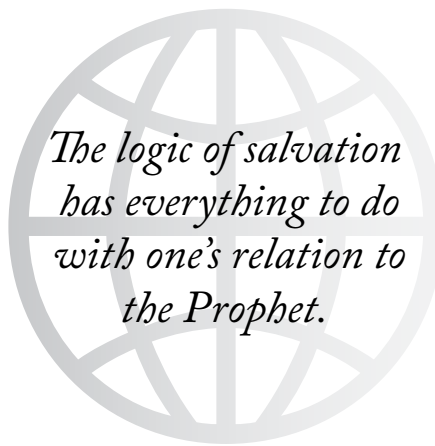
a live horse whose color is pure white. The horse, which was donated by a Hindu devotee of the *dargah* in whose courtyard the horse is kept, is venerated in memory of Zuljanah. According to the caretaker, the horse does no work. Each day the horse is given a bath and takes a two-hour walk around the city. It has its own private barn, which will soon be outfitted with an air conditioner for the summer months. When the Shi'a folk Muslims of the locality show respect for this horse, they show respect to the real Zuljanah, and by extension to the person Hussain who rode Zuljanah, and by extension to the Prophet Muhammad. In this way, by venerating and respecting a horse that resembles Zuljanah, blessing is obtained.

Anything that has some physical or spiritual connection to Muhammad may be used as a means for obtaining blessing, because all blessing is believed to come through Muhammad. In the South Asian folk Muslim's concept of *vasila,* blessing and prophethood are never separated as they are in orthodox Islam. In orthodox Islam, blessing comes directly from God, and prophethood is an institution for the guidance of humankind. But in South Asian folk Islam, humankind is cut off from God and his blessing. Blessing is available only through the appointed *vasila,* which is Muhammad, the ultimate prophet of Islam. Therefore blessing and prophethood are closely intertwined in the worldview of South Asian folk Muslims. Each of them represents a deep need as well as a core spiritual and theological doctrine.

Salvation

What these phenomena suggest is that for South Asian folk Muslims blessing (including the blessing of salvation) is primarily a *prophetological concept.* By "prophetological concept" I mean that the logic of salvation has everything to do with one's relation to the Prophet Muhammad. Orthodox Islam, relying heavily on the Qur'an, places adherence to the prophethood of Muhammad at the very center of the faith of Islam. Entrance to the faith is through the pronouncement of a creed stating the exclusive deity of one God and the prophethood of Muhammad. The Qur'an states in 7:158 and 4:69 that Muslims must believe that Muhammad is God's messenger. Eternal salvation depends on it.

For South Asian folk Muslims, the doctrine of eternal salvation is of secondary importance compared with concerns related to this present world. While I will make clear below that eternal salvation remains a persistent concern of these folk Muslims, their understanding of salvation is less focused on orthodox practices and doctrines and more concerned with forming a connection to

the Muslim community, a connection which is defined by its allegiance to the Prophet Muhammad.

Muslims generally cherish and respect all the prophets, among whom Muhammad is preeminent, especially because his prophetic authority continues into the present. In the Islamic understanding of prophethood the period of a prophet's authority extends only until the coming of the next prophet. The period of the prophethood of Jesus, for example, lasted only until the coming of Muhammad, but the prophetic authority of Muhammad will never end, since he is the final prophet. For South Asian folk Muslims, then, what is important to the obtaining of the blessing of salvation is allegiance to the final prophet, Muhammad.

Blessing of all kinds, including eternal salvation, is understood to follow from a connection with the prophet. In order to demonstrate that connection, traditional Muslims use certain identity markers such as a beard, traditional Muslim clothing, circumcision, and dietary restrictions. These identity markers have more than cultural significance. For South Asian folk Muslims, these markers are an attempt to manifest their allegiance to the worldwide Muslim community and to the Prophet Muhammad. The use of traditional identity markers connects Muslim families to the greater Muslim community, even at the expense of advancement in the world at large.[14] A connection to the Muslim community, expressed through traditional Muslim identity markers, is important because receiving salvation on the last day is associated with belonging to the community of the Prophet. Inclusion in the community of Islam is determined strictly according to adherence to the prophethood of Muhammad, so salvation for South Asian folk Muslims is primarily a prophetological concern.

A Pattern in Judaism

A helpful comparison for this South Asian folk Islam's view of salvation

*T*heir hope (not assurance) of salvation is not based on individual holiness or merit but on belonging to the "right" community.

might be the view of salvation in Second Temple Judaism. In his book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism,* E. P. Sanders is at pains to demonstrate that Judaism was not a religion of works-based salvation as was previously understood in biblical scholarship.[15] Sanders argues that Jewish people expected salvation not because they had earned it, but because they *belonged* to the Jewish people. The Jewish people had a covenantal relationship with God, so to be Jewish was to be saved.

Dunn's modification of this theory added to this basic premise the idea that the Jewish people proved or validated their inclusion in the covenant people by using certain identity markers such as dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, and circumcision.[16] The purpose of these identity markers, or "works of the Law," was not to earn salvation, but rather to demonstrate membership in the Jewish people. As shown above, South Asian Muslims make use of similar identity markers (circumcision, diet, clothing) by publicly showing their allegiance to and membership in the worldwide Muslim community.

Whether or not one accepts Sanders' interpretation of the pattern of religion in Second Temple Judaism, his work has recommended a reorientation of our conventional understanding of Second Temple Jewish soteriology. I'm suggesting that our conventional evangelical perspective on Islamic soteriology needs a similar reorientation. Evangelicals have sometimes assumed that Muslims seek salvation through a legalistic observance of the *sharia,* or Islamic law. We need to recognize, however, that Muslims hold a more nuanced view of sin and salvation. Most do not see themselves either as completely sinless or as dangerously sinful. Rather, because they *belong* to

the community of the final Prophet, they hope that a merciful God will show mercy to them on the last day. A Muslim friend explained to me that if a human parent forgives the sins and mistakes of his children, why should not God, who is so superior to humans, do the same on the last day?

Despite their expectation of forgiveness and salvation at the last day, Muslims of all kinds consider it highly presumptuous to claim eternal security. Instead of relying on their personal holiness and claiming the "assurance of salvation" (to use the evangelical Christian phrase), Muslims will assume the triumph of the faith of the Muslim community. Their hope (not assurance) of salvation is not based on individual holiness or merit but on belonging to the "right" community. The Muslim community is the one possessing the final revelation and following the final prophet. Therefore, salvation for a South Asian folk Muslim is based on belonging to the Muslim community, and this belonging is defined by one's allegiance to the final prophet. The blessing of salvation, therefore, is a prophetological concept for South Asian folk Muslims.

Social Status

One of the most sought after blessings in South Asian folk Islam is social status. All South Asian societies are hierarchical, and the structure of South Asian Muslim society is no exception. A person's position in the social hierarchy is determined primarily by ancestry, kinship, and occupation. Again, just as with other kinds of blessing sought by these folk Muslims, one's social status is determined prophetologically, as I will explain below.

Many South Asian Muslims flatly deny the existence of a clearly defined

social hierarchy in South Asian Islam, and would simply state "all Muslims are equal." The Qur'an in Sura 49:13 describes humankind as one family, and it is sometimes cited as evidence that Islam views all people as equal. In South Asian Islam, however, a social hierarchy exists that is based on ethnicity and kinship. Ethnic groups which are most closely related to the family of the Prophet Muhammad have the greatest amount of social status, while those at the bottom of the social hierarchy belong to ethnic groups having no relation to the Prophet Muhammad.

What's most important regarding this hierarchy in South Asian Islam is that a family's social status is directly correlated with its proximity to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. The top position in the social hierarchy belongs to the Sayyids, who claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Their ancestors came to South Asia as Sufi masters, traders, or invaders, and their family connection to the Prophet Muhammad is the defining mark of their community identity. The Sheikhs hold the second tier on the social hierarchy, claiming to be descendants of Arabs (but not direct descendants of Muhammad). They take the companions of the Prophet Muhammad or the prestigious tribes of Arabia for their ancestors, as reflected in their clan names (e.g., Qureshi, Abbasi, Siddiqui, etc.). The third level is made up of several non-Arab ethnic groups who came to settle in South Asia, including the Mughals, Turks, and Pathans. However, as foreign-origin Muslims they are still considered higher on the social hierarchy than are Muslims of indigenous origin. There are many different groups of indigenous-origin Muslims in South Asia who are descendants of the indigenous Indian communities who converted to Islam after the arrival of Muslim traders, preachers, and conquerors on the subcontinent. Their hierarchical social ranking is based in large part on their traditional

place in the Hindu caste system. In some cases, they have retained their traditional caste names, occupations, and kinship patterns. *Rajputs* (descendants of rulers and warriors) have a higher status than artisan castes such as *Nais* (barbers) and *Jats* (cultivators), for example. The *Mussalis* (sweeper) and *Chamars* (leatherworkers) occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder of South Asian Islam.

In this social situation, improving one's social standing can only be accomplished by drawing closer to the bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad. This is nearly impossible due to the preference among South Asian Muslims for contracting marriage alliances within their own ethnic group, with

A family's social status is correlated with its proximity to the family of the Prophet.
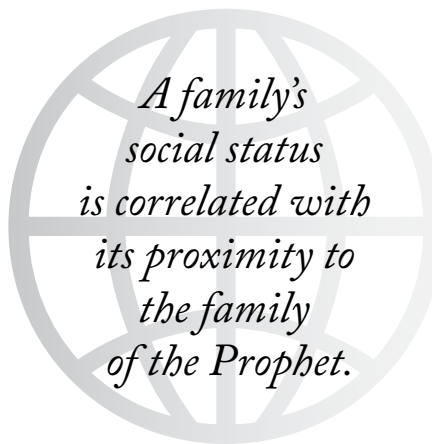
first-cousin marriages being the ideal. To improve their social status, some indigenous-origin South Asian Muslim families have invented an Arab lineage and origin story for their clan that connects the clan back to companions or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Alison Shaw documents this phenomenon by describing the ways in which lower-status South Asian Muslims try to assume the social role and status of "upper caste" Muslims.[17] Muslim missiologists bemoan the hierarchical status quo of South Asian Muslim society, noting that it is one of the biggest obstacles to the expansion of Islam in South Asia.[18] Nevertheless, most South Asian Muslims perceive a direct correlation between social

status and proximity to bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad. This social system once again confirms the thesis that for South Asian folk Muslims blessing, in this case the much sought-after blessing of social status, is always a prophetological concept.

For South Asian folk Muslims, the search for blessing is a central concern of daily life and a primary spiritual goal. Blessings such as general well being, salvation, and social status are sought through a variety of religious, spiritual, and "magical" means, each of which depends on the Prophet Muhammad for effectiveness. Because South Asian folk Muslims have a prophetological view of blessing, they are strongly inclined to seek out sources of prophetological information or inspiration in order that it might result in some type of blessing. In their worldview all the important parts of life converge upon the key concepts of prophethood and blessing.

The Biblical Themes of Blessing and Prophethood

Because South Asian folk Muslims seek out prophetological information wherever they can, a gospel presentation should give them something prophetological to think about. This kind of contextualized gospel can speak to and challenge the worldview of South Asian folk Islam. This worldview of folk Islam assumes that all of humankind, except for the prophets and saints, are separated from God by an impassable gulf. Blessing is available only through a system of mediation, and that mediation ultimately depends on the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, the Christian gospel declares that God desires direct interaction and relationship with all of humankind. He wants to provide blessing in the form of peace, joy, hope, and love. He has overcome that impassable gulf through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who restores those who believe in him to a state of blessedness.

According to the New Testament, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the people of God have direct access to God's favor and blessing. In the same way that Muslims understand their prophets, the New Testament understands the followers of Jesus: they speak God's word, enjoy God's favor, and experience God's presence in a special way. So, in the context of South Asian folk Islam, aspects of prophethood reflect what is meant by salvation and blessedness in the Bible. As will be shown below, from the perspective of South Asian folk Islam, in the New Testament Jesus transforms his followers into what the prophets are by granting them the Holy Spirit.

While prophethood and blessing are excellent concepts for facilitating conversations with folk Muslims, are they theologically sufficient for presenting the gospel? Can they explain the gospel effectively? In the following paragraphs I want to quickly introduce how the New Testament authors wove prophethood and blessing into their explanation of the gospel.

In the first chapters of Acts, we see Peter proclaiming the gospel at Pentecost with a striking message that included themes of prophethood, blessing, and the Holy Spirit. In Peter's sermon in Acts 2, he notes that after Jesus died and was resurrected, he was exalted to the right hand of God, received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear (Acts 2:33). The behavior that Peter was defending ("what you now see and hear") was the disciples' speaking in tongues and declaring the wonders of God (v. 4, 11). Peter attributes this behavior to the Holy Spirit's presence and makes a direct connection between receiving the Spirit and prophecy. This connection is important, because later Peter closely connects salvation with receiving the Spirit, so that the prophetic and salvation are fused in any reception of the Spirit.[19] Quoting the prophet Joel, Peter states that,

> In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your

O ur presentation of the gospel will require that we recognize the "prophetological" perspective so prevalent among folk Muslims.

> sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17–18)

The act of receiving the Spirit, which Peter has closely associated with prophesying, is then used to explain or describe salvation in Acts 2:38, where Peter says to the crowd:

> Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To the ears of the audience in Jerusalem, the call to repentance and salvation in Peter's sermon was also an invitation to participate in the gift of the Spirit, which had previously been the exclusive experience of the prophets of God. When the sermon is taken as a whole, it is clear that Peter is promising the audience that through faith in Jesus the audience would receive reconciliation with God and with it transformation into something like what the Old Testament prophets were.

As implied in Peter's sermon, prophethood was considered normative in the New Testament churches. The New Testament authors assumed that all believers were anointed with the Holy Spirit and had the potential to be prophets.[20] For those living in the period of Second Temple Judaism, any reference to receiving the Spirit could only be interpreted as receiving prophethood.[21] Because the Spirit was shared by all in the church community, it followed that all were imbued with prophethood.[22] Prophethood remained an important theological concept for the church until the church lost its distinctly Jewish character.[23] It remains a valid and important theological theme in the Bible that can provide a theological foundation for the church among Muslim-background believers.

The theme of blessing is also used by the biblical authors to describe salvation. Today, because of the widespread preaching of a "health and wealth" gospel, some may hesitate to use the language of blessing in relation to salvation. One might be reticent to imply that salvation results in material blessing or to minimize the importance of spiritual renewal and reconciliation with God in salvation, regardless of material blessing. Nevertheless, salvation is described in the language of blessing in Scripture.

In Galatians, Paul interpreted the death of Jesus with the language of blessing and cursing. First, Paul equates the gospel with the promise of blessing when he says that God had "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham" when he said: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Gal. 3:8). Paul made it clear that the good news of the gospel, that promise of blessing made to Abraham, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and that it is both a blessing of reconciliation with God and the gift of the Spirit that accompanies it (Gal. 3:13–14). Paul assumes that people are not naturally within the sphere of God's blessing, but that, on the contrary, all people are cursed because they do not follow the Law (Gal. 3:10–12). In his death, Jesus became a curse in order to redeem the church from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). In Galatians 3:14 Paul states that the result of redemption in Christ is that those who believe may be blessed and receive the Spirit. As I tried to show above, during the period of Second Temple Judaism (and also from the perspective of folk Islam) receiving the Spirit was functionally synonymous with becoming a prophet. Like Peter, Paul relies heavily on the language of blessing and cursing in order to explain the necessity and result of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Clearly, blessing and prophethood were central to the New Testament authors' explanation of the gospel.[24] And while these themes deeply resonate with South Asian folk Muslims, Western evangelicals usually fail to appreciate their significance. Indeed, our very different cultural and religious traditions have caused us to emphasize other biblical themes that relate to our general well-being, salvation and social status. Yet, even for Westerners, the study of prophethood and blessing in Scripture can be rewarding both spiritually and missiologically. Gazing into the world of Sufi Muslims in South Asia can help us grasp the missiological priority of harnessing these rather unfamiliar themes of blessing and prophethood in order to feature them more prominently in our presentation of the gospel. However, to do this will require that we evangelicals not only become more deeply immersed in the doctrine and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, but that we recognize—and respond to—the "prophetological" perspective so prevalent among South Asian folk Muslims. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] I first encountered the term "prophetological" in Oscar Cullmann's *The Christology of the New Testament* (p. 42). In my paper I use this term in a general way, not in a selective sense. Prophetology is simply that section of theology that deals with the phenomenon and doctrine of prophethood. Below I have included a sample of published writing in which the term is used by scholars to refer to the study of the doctrine of prophecy in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and the Baha'i faith. Outside of academic work no one seems to use the term at all, and to practicing mission personnel the term "prophetology" might be practically unknown. However, there is discussion among missionaries about the concept of prophethood with relation to Muslim evangelism. It is seen as an area of common ground between Christians and Muslims, who both view Jesus as a prophet. That common ground can be used to build trust and relationships with Muslims. My paper attempts to show why and how it works theologically and missiologically to explain the gospel in terms of prophethood (and blessing) and to orient ourselves to a "prophetological" manner of thought.

Cullmann, Oscar, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1963), p 42.

Darrow, William R. "Zoroaster Amalgamated: Notes On Iranian Prophetology." *History Of Religions* 27.2 (1987): 109–132. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Hagen, Gottfried. "The Imagined and Historical Muhammad." *Journal Of The American Oriental Society* 129.1 (2009): 97–111. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Harvey, Warren Zev. "A Third Approach To Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle." *Maimonides* 71–88. Notre Dame, Ind: Univ of Notre Dame Pr, 1988. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011

Momen, Moojan. "Bahá'u'lláh's Prophetology: Archetypal Patterns In The Lives Of The Founders Of The World Religions." *Bahá'í Studies Review* 5.1 (1995): 51–63. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Patch, Andrew. "Leo Strauss on Maimonides' Prophetology." *Review of Politics* 1(2004):83. eLibrary. Web. 17 Jul. 2011.

Qasmi, Ali Usman. "Towards a new Prophetology: Maulwï Abdullah Cakfâlawï's Ahl al-Qur'än Movement." *Muslim World* 99.1 (2009): 155–180.

Reeves, John C. "Manichaica Aramaica? Adam and the Magical Deliverance of Seth." *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119.3 (1999): 432–439.

ul-Huda, Qamar. "Knowledge of Allah and the Islamic View of Other Religions." *Theological Studies.* 64.2 (2003): 278–305.

Welburn, Andrew J. "Iranian Prophetology And The Birth Of The Messiah : The Apocalypse Of Adam." *Principat* 25, 6. 4752–4794. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Winter, T. J. "Jesus And Muhammad: New Convergences." *Muslim World* 99.1 (2009): 21–38. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.

Zebiri, Kate. *Muslims and Christians Face to Face.* Oxford: Oneworld Publications. (cited and quoted in: Gray, Leith and Andrea Gray. "Making the Story Meaningful: A Muslim Encounters the Gospel of Mark: Theological Implications of Contextual Mismatch." *IJFM* 25:3 (Fall 2008): 127–134.

[2] "Folk Islam" is a variety of Islam that combines orthodox Islamic practices with animism. Dudley Woodberry writes "Many missionaries arrived in Pakistan ill-equipped to deal with issues of power such as the demonic—a major concern of local people. I, in addition, arriving with a Ph.D. in Islam as taught, found that I did not understand Islam as lived." J. Dudley Woodberry, "Power and Blessing: Keys for Relevance to a Religion as Lived," in *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power,* eds. Charles E. Van Engen, Darrell Whiteman, and J. Dudley Woodberry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 98. It is estimated that folk Muslims comprise 70–85% of the worldwide Muslim population. Richard D. Love, "Church Planting Among Folk Muslims," *IJFM,* 11:2 (April 1994), 87.

[3] Both Islam and Christianity teach the oneness of God, the creation, the day of judgment, heaven and hell, the virgin birth of Jesus, and the prophethood of Jesus. It should be noted that these "shared" beliefs are overlapping but not identical. Distinct differences exist between Islamic and Christian doctrines, even when a basic belief (such as monotheism) is shared.

[4] Biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

[5] Douglas A. Hall, Judy Hall, and Steve Daman, *The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 250–260.

[6] Rajindar Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report* (New Delhi: Cabinet Secretariat, 2006), 237.

[7] For an evangelical perspective on folk Islam, see Bill Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam: Sharing the Gospel with Ordinary Muslims at Street Level* (Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch, 2003), Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God: Church Planting among Folk Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), and Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

[8] Rick Brown, "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part I: God and Mankind," *IJFM* 23:1 (Spring 2006), 6–7. Rick Brown, "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Age to Come," *IJFM* 23:2 (Summer 2006), 51, 52, 54.

[9] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* CD-ROM ed., s.v. "Baraka."

[10] For a detailed and insightful study on Sufism, see J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[11] Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (New Delhi: Shambhala, 1997), 121.

[12] Imam Imaduddin Abul-Fida Ismail Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets,* trans. Rafiq Abdur Rehman (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 2004), 34.

[13] Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration,* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 190.

[14] Muslims in India, for example, are at a greater risk of discrimination and even harassment in public life due to the use of Muslim identity markers (Sachar, 12). A similar situation exists for immigrant Muslim populations in the West. David Masci, *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe* (Washington D.C.: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2005), 6.

[15] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 54.

[16] James G. D. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1990), 192.

[17] Alison Shaw, *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[18] Masood Alam Falahi, *Hindustan Mein Zaat-Paat Aur Musalman [Casteism and the Muslim in India]* (Delhi: Al-Qazi, 2007).

[19] The important exegetical work linking blessing, prophethood, and the gospel can only be summarized here due to the constraints of space. I provide a much more detailed explanation in the second chapter of my thesis (Pennington, 2014).

[20] Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today,* Rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 33–34, 167–69, 347–59. See also Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology,* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), 65.

[21] David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 103–05; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

[22] Aune, 191–93.

[23] Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1963), 42.

[24] For more on this topic, see Perry Pennington "Prophethood and Blessing: A Biblical Theology of the Gospel for Folk Muslims" (diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2014).

References

Aune, David E.
1983   *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Brown, Rick
2006   "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part I: God and Mankind." *IJFM* 23:1 (Spring 2006), 5–12.
2006   "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part II, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Age to Come." *IJFM* 23:2 (April 1, 2006), 48–56.

Cragg, Kenneth
1985   *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration.* London: Allen and Unwin.

Cullmann, Oscar
1963   *The Christology of the New Testament.* Philadelphia, PA: Westminster.

Dunn, James D.G.
1990   *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians.* Louisville, KY: Westminster.
1997   *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Ernst, Carl W.
1997   *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism.* New Delhi: Shambhala.

Falahi, Masood Alam
2007   *Hindustan Mein Zaat-Paat Aur Musalman [Casteism and the Muslim in India].* Delhi: Al-Qazi.

Grudem, Wayne
2000   *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Hall, Douglas A., Judy Hall, and Steve Daman
2010   *The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

Kathir, Imam Imaduddin Abul-Fida Ismail Ibn
2004   *Stories of the Prophets,* translated by Rafiq Abdur Rehman. Karachi: Darul Ishaat.

Love, Rick
1994   "Church Planting Among Folk Muslims." *IJFM* 11:2 (April 1994), 87–91.
2000   *Muslims, Magic And The Kingdom of God: Church Planting Among Folk Muslims.* Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Masci, David
2005   *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe.* Washington, DC: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Musk, Bill
2003   *The Unseen Face Of Islam: Sharing The Gospel With Ordinary Muslims At Street Level.* Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch.

Pennington, Perry
2014   "Prophethood and Blessing: A Biblical Theology of the Gospel for Folk Muslims." thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Sachar, Justice Rajindar, Chairperson, Prime Minister's High Level Committee
2006   *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report.* New Delhi: Cabinet Secretariat.

Sanders, E. P.
1977   *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion.* London: SCM Press.

Shaw, Alison.
2000   *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain.* London: Routledge.

Stronstad, Roger
2010   *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology.* Cleveland, TN: CPT Press.

Trimingham, J. Spencer
1971   *The Sufi Orders in Islam.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Van Rheenen, Gailyn
1991   *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Bk House.

Woodberry, J. Dudley.
2008   "Power and Blessing: Keys for Relevance to a Religion as Lived." In *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power*, edited by Charles E. Van Engen, Darrell Whiteman, and J. Dudley Woodberry, 98–105. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

The Challenges of Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa

Introduction

The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, in Lebanon, has been a hub for the formation of leaders for church and society in the Middle East and North Africa region since 1960. Throughout those years, it has been cognizant of the tremendous challenges that constantly face the ch urch in the region in the area of discipleship. ABTS' Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) hosts the annual Middle East Consultation (MEC) to provide a context whereby people from around the world can explore issues of critical importance to the Middle East and beyond, in ways that seek the transformation of individuals and communities in line with the prophetic message of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this document is to highlight a variety of the day-to-day challenges facing disciples of Jesus in the MENA region today, as transpired from the 2014 Consultation. It also provides a foundation from which the Institute of Middle East Studies will seek to further develop the conversations first begun during MEC 2014. It is anticipated that some of the recommendations deriving from this document will inform our ongoing discussions on the theme of discipleship over the next two or more years. Early on, we will also attempt a definition of what we mean by the term discipleship.

MEC 2014

IMES hosted its 11th annual Middle East Consultation, "Discipleship Today: Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa," in Beirut from 16-20 June 2014. Organized for the first time in partnership with Near East Initiatives, MEC 2014 hosted nearly 200 participants from 21 countries and five continents. MEC 2014 saw the introduction of a new approach to IMES' flagship annual conference. It was intentionally designed as a consultation to allow for a far greater number of regional and international voices to be heard, both from the floor and from within the many round table discussions.

Each morning featured interviews with disciples of Jesus from a wide range of socio-cultural and religious contexts. Participants heard inspiring and challenging stories from Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Lebanon, the Gulf, the Philippines and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, interviews were conducted with experienced leaders from across the MENA region who journeyed along with many in their walk with Jesus. In dialogue with these local and regional voices, five internationally recognized theologians and missiologists of diverse backgrounds were invited as global consultants, to help us frame the conversation within the global context, and to draw out particular themes which would warrant further reflection. Consultation participants then spent a significant amount of time in round table discussi ons, reflecting upon and processing what they had learnt from the interviews.

Each day during the afternoon sessions, one of the Global Consultants was invited to present on a particular topic related to the consultation's themes, followed by a time for questions and discussion. Subjects included:

- "A Status Report on Movements of Discipleship in the MENA Context: Where We Have Been and Where We Might Be Going," Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry
- "Emerging Communities of Faith: Exploring Ecclesiological Opportunities and Challenges for Followers of Christ in the MENA Context," Dr. Rosalee Velloso Ewell
- "Roland Allen and Vincent Donovan Rediscovered," Dr. J. Andrew Kirk
- "Challenges and Opportunities in Developing a Biblical Approach to Discipleship in Relation to Social, Religious, Political and Cultural Identity," Dr. John A. Azumah
- "Distinctive Features of Contemporary Discipleship Movements," Dr. Louisa Cox

Evening sessions provided a context for inter-faith conversation, as regional Muslim leaders were invited to share their thoughts

on a range of related topics. During one of the evening sessions Dr. Robert Woodberry also gave a keynote presentation on his groundbreaking sociological research, entitled "The Great Omission: How Christian Missions Transformed the World."

Defining Discipleship

It is important to recognize that whenever we invite someone to become a disciple of Jesus, we are taking on a task with a serious level of responsibility. This is particularly so in the MENA region, where there are significant social, cultural, political and religious factors to consider. The tensions and conflicts that have existed historically in the multi-faith context of the MENA region often means that new disciples of Jesus face persecution and alienation from their community, especially when their loyalty is seen as shifting from institutional religion to the person of Jesus. Hence the methods and motivation behind those involved in discipling others takes on a significant ethical dimension. This ethical dimension is even further heightened when the ministry is among minors and vulnerable adults.

It became evident from MEC 2014 that the ways in which people understand both the nature and function of discipleship vary greatly. This diversity in understanding will lead to significantly differing approaches and practices within a wide range of contexts. For this reason, it is hard to derive a clear definition of discipleship from MEC 2014. However for the purpose of further discussion, the following definition is offered, largely inspired by the spirit of the consultation:

> Discipleship is the process of becoming more like Jesus. It is a dynamic and lifelong process whereby followers of Jesus learn to obey the Scriptures in community with other disciples through joys and sorrows. This takes place through prayer, fellowship, intentional relationships, service, and by the growing presence of the Holy Spirit in them. Disciples serve their family, community and society in accordance with their calling and gifting. The disciple is part of a community whose purpose is to impact society with the values of Jesus, to the glory of God and for the welfare of all his creation.

The Main Challenges

During the course of MEC 2014, numerous interviews with followers of Jesus highlighted a number of significant and often overlapping challenges. In broad terms, the most significant challenges that face new disciples of Jesus from within the MENA region relate to the following:

1. Discovering a healthy socio-cultural, religious and spiritual identity.

2. Sustaining and repairing relationships with families and communities for those who have become disciples of Jesus.

3. Finding acceptance and developing a healthy relationship with the existing Body of Christ.

4. Facing suffering, persecution and alienation as part of the shared experience of followers of Jesus.

5. Overcoming the inherent difficulties of religious language, terminology, and the implications for witness and discipleship.

Identity

Identity formation was probably the most significant and painful challenge facing new disciples of Jesus in the MENA region. While finding a new identity "in Christ" may be complicated in any context, significant social, cultural, religious and political dynamics of MENA were illustrated that make one's identity in Christ particularly difficult from within this context. On many occasions, the consultation heard painful stories from those who had attached their loyalty to Jesus, but who had, as a result, experienced numerous challenges reconciling their new-found and previous identities. Individual disciples often felt torn between two or more socio-religious categories, wanting to somehow identify with and fit within both, and yet often not finding acceptance in either. The risk of cognitive and affective dissonance, often resulting in a painful identity crisis, was highlighted on numerous occasions.

This was particularly evident when one's "new identity" in Jesus was likely to cause significant socio-cultural fracturing in a context. As a result, interviewees often encouraged the consultation to consider the distinction between one's socio-cultural (even "religious") identity and one's spiritual-faith identity as a disciple of Christ, regardless of heritage. It was commented upon during the course of MEC 2014 that a person's identity is multi-dimensional and fluid. As such, outside attempts that seek to impose one particular religious or cultural categorization upon a new disciple have the tendency to be neither appropriate nor helpful.

Reconciliation

The need for reconciliation was stressed on numerous occasions with two main areas standing out wherein reconciliation was much desired by disciples from diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. The first related to the restoration of positive relationships between those who

Interviewees often encouraged the consultation to consider the distinction between one's socio-cultural (even "religious") identity and one's spiritual-faith identity as a disciple of Christ, regardless of heritage.

*T*he reality we witnessed is that God is moving in the MENA region to make Jesus known within and beyond anyone's existing efforts, in ways and on a scale that would appear unprecedented.

have come to affirm their loyalty to Christ and their family members. The second involved the pursuit of healthy relationships between disciples of Jesus coming from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. Both issues are highly significant and complex within the MENA context when it comes to the discipleship process.

Reconciliation with Family

The issue of familial relationships was often painful. Many of the contributors shared their experiences of alienation from their families, resulting from their decision to become a disciple of Jesus. Some were essentially forced out of their families and wider communities as a result of their allegiance to Christ. Some of those from whom we heard had been able over time to restore varying degrees of relationship. Others, however, found this impossible. This raises significant questions for an understanding of discipleship, its intended outcomes, and the processes which may be used in contexts such as the MENA.

Questions that need further consideration include, but are not limited to:

- Are there ways for a new follower of Jesus to develop a healthy individual and social identity "in Christ" whereby he (or she) does not become alienated from his or her social, cultural and religious context, and yet do so in a way that remains faithful to the gospel?

- How might a new disciple preserve a positive witness to the transforming power of Jesus within his family and community?

- How can we accompany people on their discipleship journeys, on paths that avoid social and familial fracture and which protect them from experiencing painful cognitive and affective dissonance? How can this be done in a way that is deeply faithful to the gospel?

- How can the narrative and life paradigm of a follower of Jesus become a compelling model to members of his family and community?

- What sort of socio-cultural and religious community should a mentor, or someone who is journeying with a new disciple, encourage or desire for the person with whom he is journeying? What constitutes a healthy and supportive community of faith for a new follower of Jesus?

Reconciliation within the Body of Christ

Significant ecclesiological dimensions also emerged that were in need of reconciliation. Many new disciples of

Christ found it very difficult, if not impossible, to find a new home within the cultures and structures of existing communities of faith. This was often very painful, as those new disciples had high hopes that they would be welcomed in and loved unconditionally as brothers and sisters in Christ. Unfortunately, in many cases, this hope was not fulfilled. In some cases, the hurt was devastating and the ensuing lack of trust palpable.

It became clear that in many situations, it might not be possible or even helpful for recent followers of Christ to join with existing communities of faith in public acts of worship, fellowship or service. It was felt that, given the complex socio-cultural and religious conditions in the region, such interaction might potentially damage the living model and the witness to Christ's transforming presence within a disciple's community. That said, it was clear that there is a need for repentance on the part of those who have not been welcoming enough towards their new brothers and sisters in Christ, and that reconciliation was needed between members of different social communities.

There is also the need for hope that some of these difficulties might be overcome, and that there might be ways in which different socio-religious communities of Christ followers could learn not only to accept each other, but to seek each other's best interests through mutual love and respect. It is hoped that future Middle East Consultations might provide the foundations upon which healthy relationships might grow within the Body of Christ—even where there might continue to be different understandings of the nature of Christ-centered communities and of socio-religious practices.

The question was further asked whether existing structures, patterns and cultures of more established communities of faith are biblical in their origin. To what extent have historical and cultural dynamics determined how those from different cultures and religious communities might be accepted into the family of God? The reality we witnessed is that God is moving in the MENA region to make Jesus known within and beyond anyone's existing efforts, in ways and on a scale that would appear unprecedented. Those who might feel burdened for the guardianship of the boundaries of the body of Christ will not be able to control where God's Spirit moves, nor the methods He uses. The danger it seems is that by seeking to control access to Christ through established ecclesiastical practices, new disciples might be left watching from the sidelines. It is our hope, therefore, that we might honor and accept the movement of God, and support new disciples of Jesus in ways that do not result in

*O*thers were discipled in ways that enabled them to develop a narrative that was not as alien nor as potentially confrontational within their family contexts. This authentic faith narrative allowed for an ongoing witness.

an unnecessarily painful and burdensome process of cultural extraction, nor quench the possibilities for them to remain as vibrant witnesses within their communities.

Suffering and Persecution as Part of the Landscape

Many of the contributors at MEC 2014 had experienced persecution during their journey of discipleship as a result of their allegiance to Christ, which for some had led to an almost inevitable conflict with their families. This resulted in subsequent suffering for both parties. Others were discipled in ways that enabled them to develop a narrative that was not as alien nor as potentially confrontational within their existing family contexts. This development of an authentic faith narrative allowed for an ongoing witness. It was recognized that this was not an easy process, that committed followers of Jesus would have to confront social norms and practices, and that this might lead to difficult challenges. In this way, some degree of persecution is indeed inevitable for any follower of Christ, regardless of his or her socio-cultural and religious heritage. It was striking that the avoidance of persecution was never the motivation of some to remain in closer harmony with their native societies and cultures, but rather their desire for a more vibrant, personal testimony through their presence.

It was painful to hear from those who had experienced persecution from close family members. It was encouraging however to hear of later successful attempts to re-build family relationships, especially when those relationships had reached a point where respectful witness had become possible once again.

The call for freedom of conscience to become a lived-out reality across the MENA region was a significant theme that emerged as well. It is always appropriate for followers of Jesus to stand up for the rights of religious minorities, regardless of the religion in question, and to stand with those who have been marginalized as a result of their faith decisions. It seems prudent, however, for followers of Jesus to also act in ways that do not provoke religious hatred and intolerance within the region. Sensitivity is desirable within the conceptualization and practice of discipleship, particularly where communities are multi-religious.

Each context, be it national, cultural or familial, is unique and the nature and degree of potential backlash for becoming a follower of Jesus is different. We should be careful not to label a specific community as intolerant with regard to religious rights and freedoms based on the experiences of those from another context. The conditions within a

particular context play a significant role in the manner in which people become disciples. It seems fitting, then, that the responsible action for those involved in journeying with young disciples through the process of maturation and growth is to become very aware of the potential consequences of the approaches being used. The process of discipleship is a journey between people in community and it is important that those involved prepare themselves to be there for the persons with whom they are involved on this journey, through the good times and the bad. The importance of the relational dynamics of this journeying process cannot be overstated if discipleship is to be about people and not programs, most especially in the MENA context.

The Language of Discipleship and Witness

Language is important, and the language of discipleship is of particular importance within the multi-faith contexts of the Middle East and North Africa. The language used when coming along someone on his journey of discipleship with Jesus expresses, to a large extent, conscious and subconscious theologies. This in turn influences methodology, which has a significant impact on outcomes within the discipleship process. It is important that great care be used not to replace the gospel message with socio-cultural and religious connotations that may be inappropriate within a certain context. For example, language associated with "the church" can be ambiguous, implying either the established, historic and culturally Christian church, or the Body of Christ universal. When we talk about "identity," are we referring to social and political identity, cultural identity, religious identity or faith/spiritual identity?

In addition, it is important that we are able to express theologically complex issues, such as the understanding of Jesus as Son of God, the nature of God as One and Triune, the salvific implications of Jesus' death on the cross, in ways that are meaningful within any given socio-religious context. It is wrongly assumed that new disciples of Christ will simply fit into traditional ways of understanding, by explaining to them the theological ideas that seem alien to their own cultural context.

Careful attention must be paid in order to ensure that the message transmitted remains faithful to the gospel. Furthermore, it seems appropriate that this message be articulated in ways that may be understood and potentially welcomed in multi-religious settings like the MENA.

> But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason

W

e should avoid blanket assumptions whereby we assume models and approaches will work across the region. The same may be said of ecclesiology. One community of Christ followers may look very different from another.

for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15–16)

Further Statements Emerging from MEC 2014

MEC 2014 recognizes that even across the MENA region each context is unique and complex. Where one mode of discipleship may prove acceptable and effective, in another context it may not. We should take care to avoid blanket assumptions whereby we assume models and approaches will work across the region. The same may be said of ecclesiology. One community of Christ followers may look very different from another. Sometimes this may be the case within similar local contexts. It is wise therefore to recognize and celebrate a diversity of approaches and ministry models. Within the parameters of the gospel as laid out in the Scriptures, discipleship is incarnational and informed by the context.

One of the unique aspects of MEC 2014 was the fact that we were able to listen to what God is *actually* doing in and beyond the MENA region in bringing diverse individuals, families and people groups towards Himself and His Kingdom. Whilst there was room for theological reflection, the focus was not on critique but rather on listening and appreciation. God is bringing people towards Himself within the context of extremely difficult and turbulent times in the region, and He is doing this in diverse and unexpected ways. Many people are experiencing dreams and visions; others are having their practical needs met and seeing Jesus through those who are serving them. While we recognise the need for careful theological reflection on "models" of ministry, there comes a time when we must step back, watch and accept that God is doing what He is doing, and worship Him for it. At times He may invite the existing community of Christ to be involved in this process to a greater or lesser extent. At other times He may ask that community to be patient and accepting of what He is doing. In either case, disciples of Jesus from all backgrounds are called to lift their brothers and sisters up in prayer and encouragement.

Statements of Intention

The Institute of Middle East Studies will

• provide through the Middle East Consultation a platform for followers of Christ from different socio-cultural and religious contexts to share their experiences with one another, serving as a safe space for reflection and support;

• continue to discuss themes relating to religious rights and freedoms for all and advocate for them all, and will also continue to discuss issues of persecution and suffering as a result of religious choice within the MENA region; and

• seek to see God glorified and people reconciled within our diverse expressions of faith within the MENA region and to promote reconciliation, trust and mutual respect.

Themes for Future Middle East Consultations

MEC 2015 will explore in further detail issues relating to identity for followers of Jesus from within the MENA region. **"Discipleship Today: Identity and Belonging in the Middle East and North Africa"** will take place from **15–19 June 2015,** at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon.

Future Middle East Consultations will focus on issues relating to ecclesiology and trust, with an emphasis on fostering diverse communities of Christ-followers within the MENA region. **IJFM**

Note: To be kept up-to-date with the latest developments related to MEC 2015, please sign up at the IMES Blog: IMESLebanon.wordpress.com or contact IMES directly at IMES@ABTSLebanon.org.

Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept:
The Inadequacy of the "World Religions" Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter

by H. L. Richard

T his paper focuses on syncretism in Western Christianity as seen in the paradigm of "world religions" that is assumed in both popular thought and in missiological scholarship. Syncretism is a complex topic with various usages and nuances, yet in Christian circles the term is most often used as a pejorative against developments in non-Western churches that do not neatly align with Western Christianity. But, alternatively, this Christianity of the West is itself syncretistic, and never more so than when employing the distinctly Western construct of "religion."

My intention is to survey different definitions of syncretism in order to provoke discussion of the meaning of "religion" and of the concept of "world religions." I will then introduce current scholarship that demonstrates the Enlightenment origins of this established perspective on "religion," calling for a fundamental shift in intellectual paradigm. Traditional Christian thought is indicted as syncretistic due to the infusion of this Enlightenment worldview, yet this analysis also opens stimulating perspectives on issues of crucial concern for missiology. I will conclude with some practical suggestions for beginning to move beyond the syncretistic "world religions" paradigm.

Thinking about Syncretism

Perusing standard reference works on religion and missions reveals definitions of syncretism with subtle differences of meaning. Mark Mullins in the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* points out a difference between standard usages in the social sciences and in missiology.

> Syncretism is usually understood as a combination of elements from two or more religious traditions, ideologies, or value systems. In the social sciences, this is a neutral and objective term that is used to describe the mixing of religions as a result of culture contact. In theological and missiological circles, however, it is generally used as a pejorative term to designate movements that are regarded as heretical or sub-Christian....The legitimate cultural reshaping of Christianity is referred to as the "inculturation" or "contextualization" of the Gospel, though most social scientists would also include these cultural adaptations as examples of syncretism. (Mullins 2001:809)

H. L. Richard has been involved in ministry in the Hindu world for three decades and is one of the founders of the Rethinking Forum. He fomerly directed the Institute of Hindu Studies and has published numerous books and articles on the Christian encounter with Hinduism.

S. R. Imbach in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* is clearly in accord with this, but note the centrality of the concept of "religion" in this definition.

> Syncretism. The process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. It is the union of two or more opposite beliefs, so that the synthesized form is a new thing. It is not always a total fusion, but may be a combination of separate segments that remain identifiable compartments. (Imbach 1984:1062)

It is tempting to base this entire paper on this definition, as the assumptions about "religions" and their "fundamental tenets or nature" goes to the very heart of what this paper is addressing. It is certainly ironic that some Western Christian definitions of syncretism are demonstrably syncretistic in their use of the category "religion."[1] Before laying out the case for this observation some further comments on syncretism will be noted.

In a major work on syncretism and dialogue, Andre Droogers laid out a basic definition that is again rooted in assumptions about religion and which brings together elements of the two previously cited definitions.

> Syncretism is a tricky term. Its main difficulty is that it is used with both an objective and a subjective meaning. The basic objective meaning refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions. The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved. As a rule, the mixing of religions is condemned in this evaluation as violating the essence of the belief system. Yet, as will be shown, a positive subjective definition also belongs to the possibilities. (Droogers 1989:7)

The "trickiness" of syncretism needs to be kept constantly in mind. This paper is dealing with a very slippery concept that is "generally used as a pejorative term" (Mullins above), and seeks to

turn the pejorative back on the Western churches that all too often casually see a sawdust speck of syncretism in the non-Western churches while missing the plank that is in their own eye.

D. A. Hughes in InterVarsity's *New Dictionary of Theology* points out a major problem with the broad use of syncretism as including a positive sense of borrowing from other religious traditions.

> [Syncretism] is also used in a broader sense to describe the process of borrowing elements by one religion from another in such a way as not to change the basic character of the receiving religion. It is questionable, however, whether such a broad definition is helpful, since it makes every

The "trickiness" of syncretism needs to be kept constantly in mind.
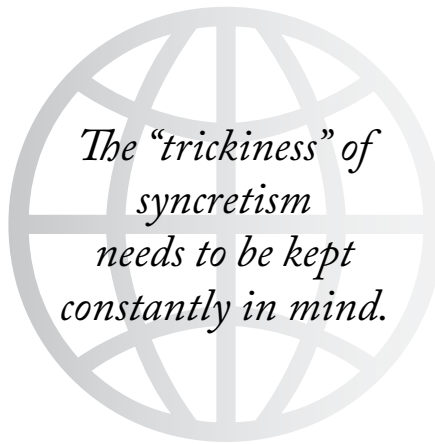
religion syncretistic to some extent. (Hughes 1988:670)

The positive sense of syncretism certainly "makes every religion syncretistic to some extent," but one could also argue that every religion is syncretistic even in the negative sense. The issue, of course, is what one means by "religion." The lack of discussion of that term in these various definitions is troubling at best and perhaps empties their points of any clear meaning. Scrutiny of paradigms for religion and world religions are the focal point of this paper.

Finally, for this initial discussion of syncretism, Scott Moreau presented a carefully nuanced definition in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*.

Moreau avoided "religion" talk, referring rather to "idea, practice, or attitude."

> Syncretism. Blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements….Syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed. We are naïve to think that eliminating the negatives of syncretism is easily accomplished. (Moreau 2000:924)

Moreau, by avoiding talk related to essences of religions, was able to acknowledge both positive and negative syncretism in every church, and his further discussion of those points in the article referenced is highly recommended.

The Concept of "World Religions"

Numerous books and academic courses introduce the major religions of the world with varying levels of sophistication.[2] In missiological circles it is also common to speak about the *world religions* as if that was a meaningful term, even though world religions textbooks often challenge that traditional language.[3] This alone is a massive problem that needs to be addressed, but as the roots of this imprecision or distortion are traced out below, it will be seen that what is at play here is syncretism.

Current academic work has challenged the commonly understood sense of "religion," although without the development of an acceptable alternate paradigm. Richard King traced the concept of religion to the Greco-Roman world, where the meaning focused on "tradition" with a recognition of the plurality of traditions (1999:35f.) With the rise of Christianity the term was redefined as "a matter of adherence to particular doctrines or beliefs rather than allegiance to ancient ritual practices" (King 1999:37). This meaning was then exported

and underlies the present concept of "world religions," but this interpretation involves a "Christian" reading of different sets of data that really do not fit the paradigm. Fritz Staal powerfully made this point.

> The inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has not only led to piecemeal errors of labeling, identification and classification, to conceptual confusion and to some name-calling. It is also responsible for something more extraordinary: the creation of so-called religions. (1989:393, quoted from King 1999:144)

In light of these realities King suggests that

> ...it is important to realize that the "world religions" as they are usually portrayed are idealized and largely theoretical constructs that bear some relationship to, but are by no means identical with, the actual religious expression of humankind, especially in the pre-modern era. One should also note that such "universal" faiths are simultaneously the homogenizing and imperialistic ideologies of a religious world. In effect by focusing upon the brahmanical strands of Indian religion, the theological treatises of Catholicism, or the scholarly Qu'ranic commentaries of Islam, one inevitably marginalizes a significant proportion of human religious experience and expression. (1999:67-68)

The Enlightenment Roots of the Concept of "World Religions"

In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote *The Meaning and End of Religion*, a seminal work critiquing the very concept of religion. He traced the roots of the modern usage of the term to the Enlightenment, where the centrality of the intellect indicated that truth and doctrine were most important in religion.

> This is the view of the Enlightenment, evinced not only in the religious realm but as a comprehensive world outlook which stressed an intellectualist and impersonalist schematization of

The inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has led to the creation of so-called religions. (Staal)

things. In pamphlet after pamphlet, treatise after treatise, decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or are not true, something whose locus is in the realm of the intelligible, is up for inspection before the speculative mind. (W. C. Smith 1962:40)

Smith adamantly objected to the intellectualizing and reification of religion, seeing personal faith as the vital reality which was obscured by this idealistic construct. "There is nothing in heaven or on earth that can legitimately be called *the* Christian faith," he asserted. "There have been and are the faiths of individual Christians..." (Smith 1962:191; italics original). This certainly seems to be an over-reaction, as there are clearly confessional communities and not merely individual faith expressions; but Smith's critique of religion as an inadequate (or erroneous) Enlightenment construct has been reaffirmed by later scholarship.

This intellectualizing of religion also began the compartmentalizing and trivializing of it. Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out that

> religion was domesticated....the Enlightenment impulse was one of tolerance and, as a necessary concomitant, one which refused to leave any human datum, including religion, beyond the pale of understanding, beyond the realm of reason. (J. Z. Smith 1982:104)

W. C. Smith returned to his theme of Enlightenment distortions thirty years later and had an even more harsh conclusion.

> When I wrote *The Meaning and End* I knew that "religion" was a Western and a modern notion. I had not yet seen, but now do see clearly, that

"religion" in its modern form is a secular idea. Secularism is an ideology, and "religion" is one of its basic categories....It sees the universe, and human nature, as essentially secular, and sees "the religions" as addenda that human beings have tacked on here and there in various shapes and for various interesting, powerful or fatuous reasons. It sees law, economics, philosophy (things we got from Greece and Rome) as distinct from religion.[4] (W.C. Smith 1992:16)

More recently this point has been powerfully outlined by Timothy Fitzgerald, who traced in detail the transition from a medieval focus on religion as Christian Truth that covered all of life to the modern sense of dichotomized and compartmentalized religion that stands in contrast with the secular.

> One thing which has presumably always been clear, even to scholars in religious studies who tend to attribute to every culture "a religion," or even several: the English-language category religion has for almost all its history been inseparable from the Christian incarnation and Christian theology, and required a process of abstraction and modern fetishism and animism before it was ready to incarnate in different manifestations in different cultural contexts. But when this contested term is projected onto other peoples, who think in entirely different languages, there is always ambiguity about whether the projector is imagining "religion" to encompass all institutions on analogy with medieval and early modern ideas, therefore seeing it as indistinguishable from holistic culture; or whether "religion" is imagined in the Calvinistic mode as radically separated from the profane world; or whether "religion" is more simply a projection of the Western religion-secular dichotomy whereby religious

practices are assumed to be different in kind from political, economic and technical/instrumental ones. (Fitzgerald 2007:104-105)

Thomas Idinopulos likewise documented the compartmentalization and trivialization of religion when secularism became dominant.

> The word, religion, acquired its own distinct meaning when the forces of secularization became so dominant in western culture that religious belief and practice became distinctly human acts. For once secularity became fully evident in society it was possible to speak by contrast of the religious way of life. (Idinopulos 2002:10)

Idinopulos objected to this development, suggesting that in both "archaic" peoples and in modern life there is evidence of "the interweaving of religion with everything else in life" (2002:10).

Richard King provides a good summary statement for this discussion.

> As a number of scholars have pointed out, both our *modern* understanding of "religion" as a "system of beliefs and practices" and the academic field of religious studies are a product of the European Enlightenment....As such its [the term "religion"] continued unreflective use cross-culturally, while opening up interesting debates and interactions over the past few centuries (and creating things called "interfaith dialogue" and "the world religions"), has also closed down avenues of exploration and other potential cultural and intellectual interactions. (King 2011:39; italics original)

This line of analysis leads to King's conclusion that

> The continued unreflective use of the category of "religion," however, does not carry us forward in our attempt to understand better the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. (King 2011:43)

This is not a conclusion that can be merely observed by a missiological world which purports to wrestle with understanding and communicating into

the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. If King is right, radical change of missiological paradigms and terminologies is required. Since King speaks for a considerable consensus in the academic world, if he is wrong the missiological world must enter the fray and, at the very least, defend whatever it is that it might think to be the true understanding of "world religions."

Missiology, the Enlightenment and World Religions

I have attempted a brief summary of the case that a "world religions" paradigm developed out of the Enlightenment compartmentalization of religion within a dominantly secular world. This is a

This perspective is at odds with the holism of biblical faith.
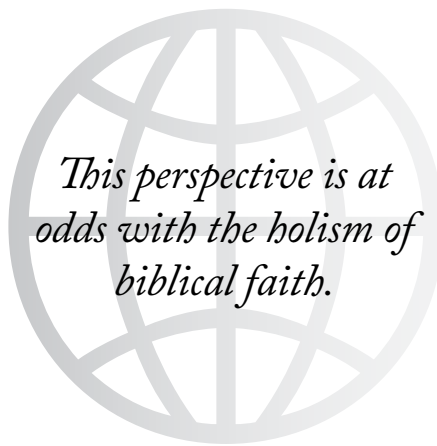
perspective at odds with the holism of biblical faith, yet Western Christians, many of whom boast of a biblical worldview, seem to have embraced terms and ideas from this alien worldview.

It is not as if missiology has completely failed to notice the significance of these discussions. Over thirty years ago Harvie Conn objected to the dichotomization of religion and culture, calling for a biblical missiology which puts all of life under the Lordship of Christ, not merely "religious" life.

> Cultural anthropology has increasingly refuted the bifurcation of religious from cultural life, of the sacred from the secular in the world's ethne. But the Pietist mythologization of individualism

into a theological construct has hindered the church from incorporating that insight into missionary methodology. (Conn 1979:214)

The example of this Western syncretism with Enlightenment thought on religion is by no means singular. Andrew Walls implicated the entire nineteenth century missionary movement as fundamentally syncretistic, although he did not use that pejorative label.

> ...nineteenth century missions were part of an Enlightenment project, stamped by Enlightenment ideals; the evangelical Christianity that underlay them had made its peace with the European Enlightenment and operated in its categories. (2002:244)

In a lecture Walls later applied this perspective to current Western missiological thought.

> One of the things we have to get beyond in the next stage of Christianity is the Enlightenment. We can't give it up ourselves because it is part of our identity. But we have to realize it is not part of everyone's background. (Walls 2011)

The supposition of syncretism among Western Christians is not new.[5] The process of rooting out Enlightenment-related syncretism will be so complex that it may never be fully achievable, as Walls noted. But as Western missionaries call other peoples to battle against syncretism, they must engage battle with their own hearts and minds regarding their own homegrown varieties of syncretism.

This paper barely introduces the complex issue of "world religions" as an example of Enlightenment-rooted syncretism in missiological and popular thought.[6] A thorough analysis of "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" and "Christianity" as empty reifications should be presented here, but space and time forbid.[7] But be forewarned that many practitioners of these traditions will likely object to this deconstruction of their reified paradigms. The resistance experienced in inter-religious encounter

often forces mission practitioners to grip even tighter their own syncretistic paradigm. Thus, the vital question, who speaks for any of these traditions? Who has the right to speak for Hinduism, or for Christianity? Which of the many Hinduisms is the truly valid expression; which type of Christianity is the legitimate one, when each seems to claim that for itself?

Missiology all too easily employs the binary language of "religion" and "culture" without any recognition of the problems involved, let alone a serious grappling with numerous profound implications. When syncretism is discussed and defined in terms of religions and their intermixing, particularly when "cultural" elements are considered acceptable for adaptation but "religious" elements are viewed as tainted, this is itself an expression of the syncretism within Enlightenment constructs.

Paradigms or terminologies that suggest that there is an essence of Hinduism or Islam are likewise syncretistic, reflecting the Enlightenment reification of masses of disparate and even contradictory ideas and practices into the neat package of "world religions." Paradigms or terminologies that define syncretism based on religious concerns without recognition of the presuppositions involved in Western use of religious phraseology are also syncretistic. These lines of thought can lead one towards despair, because Westerners are deeply, even subconsciously, implicated in Enlightenment thought, as pointed out by Andrew Walls.

A Way Forward?

Is there a way forward for missiology and missiologists (not to mention popular parlance and lay Christians)? Scott Moreau is certainly right that, "We are naïve to think that eliminating the negatives of syncretism is easily accomplished" (Moreau 2000:924), and this is most definitely true in relation to our own syncretisms.

*M*issiology all too easily employs the binary language of "religion" and "culture" without any recognition of the problems involved.

Three steps can be taken to begin extricating our understanding of Christian faith from syncretistic bonding to Enlightenment-rooted paradigms and terminologies related to religion. These steps are just a beginning towards long term solutions that might root out the depths of this syncretism based on deep reflection and interaction with ongoing discussions of these matters in the secular academy.[8]

One first step towards transcending the inadequate paradigm of "world religions" as it is expressed in both academic and popular discourse would be *to insist on always speaking in the plural and never in the singular*. "Buddhism" gives a false impression of unity; speaking of "Buddhist traditions" avoids the suggestion of unity and takes a significant step away from the false reification of the "world religions" paradigm. Similarly, Christianity should not be referred to in the singular; there is too much diversity present for the usage in the singular to carry any substantial meaning.

Second, rather than being content with the lazy use of these broadly general terms (even in plural forms), it is decidedly preferable that *contextually specific terms be employed*. "Hinduism" does not consider the world to be an illusion, and it would be simply erroneous to affirm this about "Hindu traditions." The Advaita Vedanta tradition, one school among the Hindu traditions, has often suggested that the world is an illusion, with contested understandings of not only that term but also of how truly representative it is of Advaitic thought. Similarly, one can speak quite *meaningfully* about even such a broad category as American Evangelical Christianity, although more *meaningfully* about American Evangelical Anglicans/ Presbyterians/Baptists, etc. Each of the

major "religious" traditions has "confessional" groupings that can be *meaningfully* spoken about (many of these claim to be the true spokespersons for their "world religion.") Careful thought is needed to speak *meaningfully* in terms of these sub-groupings, avoiding the broad (and usually demonstrably false) generalizations often used for world religions in the singular.

Third, *the change of religion terminology needs to be abandoned as a meaningful way to speak of someone becoming a disciple of Jesus*. This seems to be increasingly the trend, even as the meaning of *Christian* is deeply distorted even in the *Christian* world, let alone among Muslims or Hindus. This represents a significant departure in missiological parlance, as a "convert" from Hinduism or Buddhism to Christianity is just the normal way to think and speak about many people historically and in the present. Yet this traditional terminology has been questioned by many outside the Western world, with an increasing exploration and embracing of "multiple religious belonging" and of "insider movements" that reject the "change of religion" paradigm.[9]

A recent statement from leaders of Roman Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical thought on witness and dialogue illustrates the assumption that Christians expect people of other faiths to "change religion," without reflecting on the roots or implications of this terminology.

> Christians are to acknowledge that *changing one's religion* is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.[10] (WCC 2011:5; emphasis mine)

The intent of this impressive interconfessional statement is clearly to reduce inter-religious tensions

and to call Christians to high ethical standards. Yet, by yoking itself to the "change of religion" terminology Christian bondage to Enlightenment categories is perpetuated. If the argument of this paper is valid, this entire "change of religion" paradigm also represents a syncretistic concession (albeit subconscious) to an Enlightenment worldview. Certainly great respect needs to be shown to individuals who under the current paradigm want to change religions and religious labels, whether into or out of Christianity, but this should no longer be seen as normative when the basic paradigm in play has been exposed as syncretistic.

The challenge of "religion" and of transcending the Enlightenment worldview that dominates the Western world (and that increasingly influences all the world through modernization and globalization) is a complex matter that defies easy solution. The discipline of missiology should be in the forefront of confessional Christian efforts to grapple with these constructs. Yet it hardly seems to be on the agenda, as Enlightenment-speak about "world religions" and "changing religions" is ubiquitous, suggesting that missiology as a discipline has not yet adequately engaged discussions and controversies in the field of religious studies.

May those who interact with this paper embrace the three suggested steps and contribute to deeper and abler developments towards better paradigms and terminologies for the future. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1.] Larry Posten, in an appeal for contextualization without syncretism, is more deeply implicated in syncretism by his strong emphasis on the centrality of religion. "First, we must *determine to the best of our ability what are the actual religious practices and religious objects of a particular culture that are purely religious in nature*" (2006: 252; italics original).

[2.] Some books and courses, in line with the approach of this paper, now present what John Stratton Hawley calls a "guerilla

warfare" against their own basic structure. "One clear-headed approach is to wage a steady program of guerilla warfare against the hapless [world religions] textbook—perhaps even against the stated subject matter of the course itself" (Hawley 2006:118).

[3.] Note Friedhelm Hardy's comment in *The World's Religions* as an example of this. "The conventional labels of 'Buddhism,' 'Jainism' or 'Sikhism' neither exhaust the (very large) range of the traditions we can identify outside the most unhelpful title of 'Hinduism,' nor do they, for the most part, even define proper 'religious systems.'" (1988:573-574)

[4.] This focus on the Enlightenment's contribution to a reductionist understanding of "religion" is not meant to suggest that there were no positive results from the Enlightenment, even in the area of "religion," particularly religious tolerance.

[5.] For example, see Hesselgrave 2006: 79ff., Jennings 2006, and other studies in Van Rheenen 2006.

[6.] David Bosch painted a devastating picture of Enlightenment influences on Christian missions, but did not focus on the "world religions" paradigm (1991:262-345; cf. 477-483). This paper could be considered a further application of Bosch's principles to an area not yet clearly seen when he wrote.

[7.] The power that these reified categories manifest is a point not overlooked in scholarly analysis, and qualifies the "emptiness" of the reifications. See, for an example in cross-cultural contexts, Arvind-Pal Mandair's reference to "someone for whom the concept of religion may not have existed in their language(s) prior to their accession to the dominant symbolic order imposed by the colonizer/hegemon, but for whom this now exists as if it had been an indigenous concept all along….[necessitating] distancing oneself from the concept of religion while fully acknowledging that the vestiges of 'religion' continue to haunt their very existence and the possibilities of cultural formation" (Mandair 2009:434).

[8.] Is there sufficient representation from the missiological field in the discipline of religious studies? Is there even adequate interaction with ideas generated from within that discipline?

[9.] On multiple religious belonging, see Cornille 2002 and Tan 2010, 2012. On insider movements see the papers collected in Winter 2007 and Travis and Talman (forthcoming). I have a forthcoming paper (Richard) on "New Paradigms for Religion, Multiple Religious Belonging and Insider Movements" that further explores these matters.

[10.] The language of religious freedom, development and universal human rights are all rooted in Enlightenment constructs; see Dallmayr 1998:247ff. for discussion of this.

References

Bosch, David J.
   1991   *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission.* American Society of Missiology Series no. 16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Conn, Harvie
   1979   "Conversion and Culture: A Theological Perspective with Reference to Korea." In *Gospel and Culture,* edited by John Stott and Robert T. Coote, 195–239. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Cornille, Catherine, ed.
   2002   *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity.* Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Dallmayr, Fred
   1998   *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Droogers, Andre
   1989   "Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem." In *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach,* edited by Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout and Anton Wessels, 7–25. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

Fitzgerald, Timothy
   2007   *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardy, Friedhelm
   1988   "The Classical Religions of India." In *The World's Religions,* edited by Peter Clarke, Friedhelm Hardy, Leslie Houlden and Stewart Sutherland, 569–659. London: Routledge.

Hawley, John Stratton
   2006   "Comparative Religion for Undergraduates: What's Next?" In *Comparing Religions: Possibilities and Perils?,* edited by Thomas A. Idinopulos, Brian C. Wilson and James Constantine Hanges, 115–142. Leiden: Brill.

Hesselgrave, David J.
   2006   "Syncretism: Mission and Missionary Induced?" In *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents,* edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, 71–98. Evangelical Missiological Society

Series No. 13, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Hughes, D. A.
1988   "Syncretism." In *New Dictionary of Theology,* edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, 670. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

Idinopulos, Thomas A.
2002   "The Strengths and Weaknesses of Durkheim's Methodology for the Study and Teaching of Religion." In *Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today,* edited by Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson, 1–14. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.

Imbach, S. R.
1984   "Syncretism." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* edited by Walter A. Elwell, 1062–1063. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

Jennings, Nelson
2006   "Suburban Evangelical Individualism: Syncretism or Contextualization?" In *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents,* edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, 159–178. Evangelical Missiological Society Series No. 13, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

King, Richard
1999   *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East."* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2011   "Imagining Religions in India: Colonialism and the Mapping of South Asian History and Culture." In *Secularism and Religion-Making,* edited by Mark Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair, 37–61. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kunin, Seth Daniel, ed.
2006   *Theories of Religion: A Reader.* With Jonathan Miles-Watson. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Mandair, Arvind-Pal S.
2009   *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Masuzawa, Tomoko
2005   *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Moreau, A. Scott
2000   "Syncretism." In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, edited by A. Scott Moreau, 924–925. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Mullins, Mark R.
2001   "Syncretistic Movements." In *Dictionary of Asian Christianity,* edited by Scott W. Sunquist, 809–810. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

Posten, Larry
2006   "'You Must Not Worship in Their Way': When Contextualization Becomes Syncretism." In *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents,* edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, 243–263. Evangelical Missiological Society Series No. 13, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Richard, H. L.
2015   "New Paradigms for Religion, Multiple Religious Belonging and Insider Movements." *Missiology,* (forthcoming).

Smith, Jonathan Z.
1982   *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown.* Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell.
1962   *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind.* New York: Macmillan.
1992   "Retrospective Thoughts on *The Meaning and End of Religion.*" In *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality,* edited by Michel Despland and Gérard Vallée, 13–21. Waterloo, ON: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses by Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Staal, Fritz
1989   *Rules Without Meaning: Rituals, Mantras and the Human Sciences.* New York: Peter Lang.

Tan, Kang-San
2010   "Dual Belonging: A Missiological Critique and Appreciation from an Asian Evangelical Perspective." In *Mission Studies* 27(1), 24–38.
2012   "The Inter-Religious Frontier: A 'Christian-Buddhist' Contribution." In *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29(1), 23–32.

Travis, John and Harley Talman
Understanding Insider Movements, (forthcoming). Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Van Rheenen, Gailyn, ed.
2006   *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents.* Evangelical Missiological Society Series No. 13, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

Walls, Andrew
2002   *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
2011   "Turning Points in World Church History." Unpublished lectures, William Carey International University, Pasadena, CA.

Winter, Ralph D., ed.
2007   "The Jerusalem Council: Description or Prediction?" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24(1).

World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance
2011   *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.* Online version sourced on May 26, 2012 at http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/Christian-Witness_recommendations.pdf.

Young, Katherine K.
1992   "World Religions: A Category in the Making?" In *Religion in History: the Word, the Idea, the Reality,* edited by Michel Despland and Gérard Vallée, 111–130. Waterloo, ON: Published for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses by Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Book Reviews

Song of the Heart (Sri Hriday Gita), by Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (New Dehli, India: APH Publishing House, 2014, pp. 189)

—*Reviewed by Darren Duerksen*
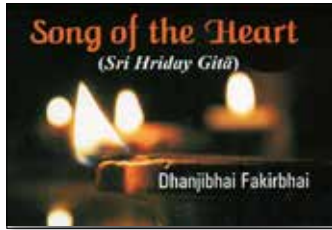
I thoroughly enjoyed this book, though for a Euro-American reader *Song of the Heart* can, at first, seem somewhat strange. The book is made up entirely of passages that echo or quote the Gospels and letters of the New Testament, but they are rearranged and paraphrased in unique ways. Even the physical layout, with the binding at the top so that the reader has to flip the pages upwards, signals that this is no ordinary book. One quickly wonders what exactly *is* this *Song of the Heart* and what is it trying to do?

As the translators explain, *Song of the Heart (Sri Hriday Gita)* is a fresh translation of a book written in the mid 1950s in Gujarati. The author Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (1895-1967) grew up in a Hindu family in Gujarat, India and, as a young man, became a follower of Christ. Unlike many Christians, however, he remained attuned to Hindu culture and philosophy and, following his retirement, reflected and wrote extensively on connections between Hindu and Christian thought and scriptures.

Song of the Heart is one such manuscript. In it, Fakirbhai attempts to reinterpret the message of Jesus and his followers using the format, style and linguistic feel of the *Bhagavad Gita,* or *Song of the Lord.* In that classic Hindu text, the Lord Krishna engages his soon-to-be disciple Arjuna in a series of dialogues. Each chapter focuses on different yogas, or paths or disciplines, that progressively reveal the true nature of reality and the purpose and path for humanity. It was, and is, a particularly important text for Hindus of the later *bhakti* (devotional traditions). In like manner, Fakirbhai arranges sayings of Jesus and his disciples in a type of dialogue, each of which highlights a different *yoga* or way in the life of a disciple. Chapter six, for example, focuses on *Premyog,* or the Yoga (or way) of Love, and includes many passages from the Gospel and letters of John, among others. In this and other chapters, Fakirbhai paraphrases the biblical passages using words and language drawn from the *bhakti* traditions.

The current volume, then, seeks to bring Fakirbhai's unique project to an English-speaking audience, though not for the first time. An English translation was published in 1969 after Fakirbhai's death. However, the Indian translators of that version made the curious decision to use and insert verses from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible rather than translate Fakirbhai's own paraphrase of verses.

To rectify this, the translators of the current edition sought to produce a translation that was more faithful to Fakirbhai's paraphrase and that would preserve its sensitivity to Hindu and *bhakti* traditions. To aid this, the translators at times use the Gujarati/Sanskrit terms with the English translation in parentheses. In addition, the book's landscape and top-bound format seeks to physically replicate the way in which ancient Hindu palm-leaf manuscripts of Hindu texts were traditionally copied and read.

Such translation choices beg the question, for whom is this book intended, and what is its purpose? There are at least two audiences that may find *Song of the Heart* interesting and helpful. The first and main group for whom it would appeal would be readers who are familiar with the *Bhagavad Gita.* For example, many English-speaking Hindus, or those from Hindu backgrounds, may perhaps recognize the format and resonate with the Gujarati and/or Sanskrit terms included in the text. In so doing, such readers may hear and understand the teachings of Jesus and his disciples more easily than they would via some of the Gospels and letters of the New Testament. Those who have worked among Hindus, or any group unfamiliar with the Bible, know how confusing certain parts of the Bible (particularly the epistles) can be to these groups. Certainly an important part of discipleship should include learning how to read and understand the Bible. However, *Song of the Heart* could provide Hindus a helpful bridge and an introduction to important teachings and themes of the New Testament, the experience of which may invite them to read and seek to understand the Bible itself.

Non-Hindu background readers may also find *Song of the Heart* interesting, though Christian readers may be confused by the way in which biblical passages are pulled from their original contexts and juxtaposed with passages from other parts of the New Testament. This may particularly be the case for those of us who are used to hermeneutical approaches that interpret a given verse in relation to its literary context. However, it was helpful for me to remember that the Christian church has periodically arranged and presented Scriptures according to themes for the purposes of teaching and worship, such as in catechisms and liturgies. If the *Song of the Heart* can be understood as a type of catechism that organizes and introduces passages of the New Testament according to certain themes, readers may encounter refreshing or even new understandings of Jesus' teachings.

*T*he book may provide a window into the way in which a Christian in a Hindu context, particularly one influenced by Hindu bhakti *or devotional traditions, might read and understand aspects of the gospel.*

In addition, missiologists and scholars of World Christianity may find *Song of the Heart* to be an interesting example of a locally produced, vernacular theology. Viewed in this way, the book may provide a window into the way in which a Christian in a Hindu context, particularly one influenced by Hindu *bhakti* or devotional traditions, might read and understand aspects of the gospel. In the following paragraphs, I will suggest some possible areas and connections that scholars could explore more fully in this regard.

One area that could be explored regards the ways in which aspects of the *Bhagavad Gita* and its hermeneutic tradition may imbue *Song of the Heart.* For example, the *Bhagavad Gita* is normally considered by Hindus to be *smriti*—or extensions of truth arising from past Vedic scriptures that were "remembered" and written down. *Smriti* texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* serve to awaken within its hearers the memory of fundamental truths (Rosen, xi). In a similar sense, while not claiming to be scripture itself (since it is a paraphrase), *Song of the Heart* nonetheless seeks to highlight for its Hindu hearers aspects of God's intent and teaching that they had heard, or only partly heard, but not fully understood. Just as the *Bhagavad Gita* sought to draw together and represent strands of thought from the Vedas, so *Song of the Heart* seeks to draw together and represent strands of thought from the New Testament in ways that address the questions and devotional sensitivities of modern Hindus.

Another area for exploration is the ways in which *Song of the Heart,* similar to Hindu texts, seeks to not only convey meaning, but also more importantly, to help readers experience truth. Whereas much Western biblical hermeneutics focus on the *meaning* of a text, Hindu hermeneutics has traditionally sought to evaluate the *experience* a text like the *Bhagavad Gita* creates. As R.D. Sherma has pointed out in her discussion of the *Bhagavad Gita,* most Hindu hermeneutical schools of interpretation prioritized the importance of "practical" methodologies, evaluating a text and its theory based on its capacity to give rise to a practical experience (Sherma, 10). In other words, scriptures such as the *Gita* were authoritative insofar as their teaching evoked experience, including *bhakti* devotion. Could it be that *Song of the Heart,* reflecting this sensitivity, prioritizes this hermeneutic and seeks to help people experience a love for God? It would certainly explain why Fakirbhai felt the freedom to paraphrase and re-arrange biblical texts. His desire was perhaps to help Hindus *experience* the gospel, hoping that they would subsequently turn to the Bible for fuller understanding. Again, those of us schooled in Western biblical hermeneutic traditions may wonder at this, but it remains an important area for further reflection and study.

Whether as a devotional text or an example of a local, devotional theology, *Song of the Heart* is certainly worth reading. And, perhaps most importantly, it is worth sharing with those from Hindu backgrounds who are interested in learning about the way of Jesus. **IJFM**

References
Rosen, Steven.
    2007   *Krishna's Song: A New Look at the Bhagavad Gita.* Praeger.
Sherma, Rita D.
    2008   "Introduction." In *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Toward a Fusion of Horizons.* Edited by Rita D. Sherma and Arvind Sharma. Springer.

In Others' Words

Editor's note: In this department, we highlight resources outside of the IJFM: *other journals, print resources, DVDs, web sites, blogs, videos, etc. Standard disclaimers on content apply. Due to the length of many web addresses, we sometimes give just the title of the resource, the main web address, or a suggested search phrase. Finally, please note that this October–December 2014 issue is partly composed of material created early in 2015. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience caused by such anachronisms.*

Different Views of the Prophet Muhammad

In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* killings in Paris, ostensibly provoked by a satirical cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad, many scholars and journalists have taken a long, hard look at historic representations of the Prophet in media. *The New Republic,* in an article entitled "What Gandhi Understood About Inflammatory Depictions of the Prophet Muhammad," led off with a recounting of the assassination in India of a Hindu publisher in 1929 following the distribution of a derogatory pamphlet called "The Colorful Prophet." Meanwhile, in her meticulously researched *Newsweek* article, "The Koran Does Not Forbid Images of the Prophet," University of Michigan art historian Christiane Gruber took issue with this commonly-held notion.

The Connection Between Islam and Violence

In late February 2015, the Muslim World League sponsored a three-day conference in Mecca on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism. One of the main speakers was Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Sunni Islam's most respected Islamic university, the al-Azhar in Cairo. *The Atlantic* in "An Anti-ISIS Summit in Mecca" quoted him as saying that after discounting poverty, social marginalization, and incarceration as the primary causes of radicalization, "the most prominent source of radicalization among Muslims is the historical accumulations of extremism and militancy in our heritage."

John Azumah, an associate professor of World Christianity and Islam at Columbia Theological Seminary, has written a brilliant piece for *First Things* on the connection between Islam and violence. Entitled "Challenging Radical Islam," his cogent analysis of the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence is significant to an understanding of the roots of Islamic extremism. He asks, "How is it that groups so widely condemned as heretical by Islamic authorities receive so much tacit support from the mainstream Muslim world?" He then turns to evangelicals and claims that we have

> contributed to the invisibility of Christian presence and witness in Muslim lands [by not] . . . openly challenging the criminalization of Christian missions and evangelism in Muslim contexts . . .

Powerful questions that deserve thoughtful answers.

The Middle East is Not Just Muslim

Dr. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, has written a short background article for the BBC on "How Christianity's Eastern History Has Been Forgotten." It recounts many centuries when religious minorities peacefully co-existed but also mentions historic devastations such as those perpetrated by Tamerlane, which "hideously foreshadow" the ISIS attacks. A February 27, 2015 *New York Times* article entitled "ISIS Onslaught Engulfs Assyrian Christians" details how more than 350 Assyrian Christians have been abducted, over 30 of their villages decimated, and priceless Assyrian museum artifacts in Mosul systematically destroyed. To top it off, ISIS began bulldozing the UNESCO World Heritage site of Nimrud (NYT, March 5, 2015). For links to recent scholarly presentations about religious minorities in the Middle East, check out www.Middle-East-Minorities.com/videos.html.

Prophetological Worldviews Make the Front Page

Into the dispute of whether radical jihadist movements are truly Islamic comes a lengthy and hotly contested article published online in *The Atlantic* called "What ISIS Really Wants." The cover story for the March 2015 print edition, this article has drawn reactions from all over the world, including some disturbingly approving tweets from ISIS supporters. For Graeme Wood's comments on them, see "What ISIS Really Wants: The Response." Two days later, *The Atlantic* published the first Muslim pushback in which the author, Caner K. Dagli, claimed ISIS was just cherry-picking Qur'anic texts with which it agreed and ignoring those with which it disagreed.

Middle Eastern Missiologists Respond to *Atlantic* Article

What are Middle Eastern missiologists saying about these prophetological worldviews? Martin Accad responds to *The Atlantic* article in a blog called "Beating Back ISIS," while Nabeel Jabbour blogs on the same article, giving ten credible reasons why young Muslims all over the world are joining the Islamic State. The last sentence of Jabbour's piece links to a newsletter by Ramez Attalah, director of the Bible Society of Egypt, which was written after twenty-one Eygptian Coptic Christian young men were beheaded in Libya.

The Witness of the Egyptian Martyrs

No sooner had ISIS released its video of the beheadings by the sea than the Bible Society of Egypt set out to produce a tract for Egyptians that would counteract the message of terror. In the first week alone, a record-breaking 1.65 million copies of "Two Rows by the Sea" were distributed to Muslims and Christians alike. Jayson Casper, in his *Christianity Today* article entitled "How Libya's Martyrs are Witnessing to Egypt," writes that this tract

> contains biblical quotations about the promise of blessing amid suffering, alongside a poignant poem in colloquial Arabic [which ends with]: *Who fears the other? The row in orange, watching paradise open? Or the row in black, with minds evil and broken?* **IJFM**

IJFM & Perspectives
On the World Christian Movement

Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the* Perspectives *materials. For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given* **IJFM** *issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, including a list of classes, visit www.perspectives.org.*

Related Perspectives Lesson and Section

Articles in IJFM 31:4

	Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 9: The Task Remaining (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets? Harley Talman (pp. 169–90)	X			X
Towards A Theology of Islam: A Response to Harley Talman Martin Accad (pp. 191–3)		X		X
From Prophethood to the Gospel: Talking to Folk Muslims about Jesus Perry Pennington (pp. 195–203)		X	X	
Middle East Consultation 2014: The Challenges of Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa (pp. 204–8)		X		X
Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept: The Inadequacy of the "World Religions" Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter H. L. Richard (pp. 209–15)	X		X	X
Book review of *Song of the Heart* Darren Duerksen (pp. 216–17)	X		X	X

MIDDLE EAST CONSULTATION 2015

Discipleship Today: Identity and Belonging in the Middle East & North Africa

The Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Beirut, Lebanon, will again be hosting its annual Middle East Consultation. MEC 2015 will focus on specific challenges related to "identity" and "belonging" that face followers of Jesus within the MENA context. These challenges are particularly important given the diverse socio-religious and cultural backgrounds of Christ-followers in the region and of the leaders who disciple them.

We live in a world where belonging to multiple social and cultural traditions is the reality for many. Identity is a complex and multi-dimensional aspect of human life, formed in part as a response to a variety of dynamic social, cultural, historical, political, religious and spiritual experiences and commitments within today's interconnected world.

MEC 2015 will consist of listening to and reflecting on personal testimonies from those who live in the midst of specific challenges pertaining to identity and belonging. Conversations with diverse global missiological thinkers and practitioners, as well as round-table discussion groups will provide a unique context for reflection on the practice of discipleship in the MENA region.

This hermeneutical dynamic (or process of accountable theological reflection) provides a framework for mutual enrichment within the worldwide Body of Christ, one that we are convinced will impact the future of Christ-centered witness in and beyond the MENA region.

To apply for MEC 2015, please visit

imeslebanon.wordpress.com | www.abtslebanon.org/mec2015

ABTS · IMES Institute of Middle East Studies

Have you considered a Master's degree to help you become more effective for God's Kingdom in the MENA region?

- MRel -
Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies

The MRel is a unique and innovative multidisciplinary program designed for individuals who want to be involved in addressing the real issues facing Middle Easterners in and beyond the Middle East and North Africa. Administered primarily online with two two-week residencies per year in Lebanon, this postgraduate degree focuses on providing a strong theoretical understanding of the region and the issues that it faces, combined with an emphasis on developing applied skills needed to work in the region and among MENA communities worldwide. It is based upon a strong theological and Biblical framework in that each module will weave scripture and theology into its theory and practice.

The MRel aims at opening new doors for students with relief and development agencies that address poverty and humanitarian crisis, with church and mission organizations seeking to engage with Islam and historic Christianity, as well as with advocacy and peace-building organizations. These opportunities may be based in the MENA region or elsewhere.

For more information or to apply, please contact:

MRel@abtslebanon.org
www.abtslebanon.org/mrel | IMESLebanon.wordpress.com/mrel

IMES Institute of Middle East Studies

ABTS
Arab Baptist Theological Seminary