

Reimagining Frontier Mission Sacred Misinterpretation across the Christian-Muslim Divide

by Martin Accad

Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at the EMS/TSFM 2019 annual conference under the theme "Mission in Global Crisis." The author's assessment of the history of Christian mission to Islam as a journey through "sacred misinterpretation" is treated more comprehensively in his recent book, Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide (Eerdmans, 2018).

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 is Chief Academic Officer at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon and holds faculty appointments in Islamic Studies at both ABTS and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. He also directs the Institute of Middle East Studies at ABTS, an annual conference on the Middle East and Islam, and the Institute's new Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies.

The trauma of physical and sexual abuse, broken relationships, devastating wars, racial injustice, economic woes, and personal loss has destroyed for many the illusion of sanctuary and wholeness in the here and now. Christendom assumptions regarding place and privilege that exist throughout the Western world, and its refrains of God and country, triumphant Christianity, and naive optimism, ring hollow in the face of such severe personal and societal afflictions. When no longer culturally privileged or politically courted, Western Christians will have to choose whether or not they will sojourn as aliens and pilgrims in the wasteland of what was once Christendom. To think otherwise is a delusion.¹

These are the words of Michael Stroope's powerful critique of the post-Christendom church in the Western world. But these could just as well have been the words of Michael the Syrian (the Great), the famous Chronicler of the twelfth century who, after the sacking of Edessa by the Turks in the 1140s, exclaimed that

the city of Abgar, the friend of Christ, was trampled underfoot *because of our iniquity*... Some aged priests... recited the words of the prophet, "I will endure the Lord's wrath, because I have sinned against Him and angered Him." And they did not take flight, nor did they cease praying until the sword rendered them mute.²

Granted that the language of Stroope does not sound as apocalyptic as that of Michael the Syrian. But it is not unusual for church historians to observe the unravelling of an era by bemoaning the misconduct of the church, fallen victim to its own complacency. Philip Jenkins, too, in his pessimistic [survey of the decline of Eastern Christianity](#), *The Lost History of Christianity*, describes the ever-repeating cycle of the church in history, from rise to political triumphalism, to collapse under the burden of its own political maneuverings, as it falls prey to its thirst for worldly power.

Christendom Is Dead!

Praise the Lord! And with it, one can hope, triumphalist Christianity and its hollow mission . . .

The first ascent of the church from a persecuted community of martyrs and saints to that of political masters and oppressors built gradually upon the achievement of the Edict of Milan in 313. This edict proclaimed the end of

the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire and the return of confiscated properties to the church. But with the granting of temporal power, the Edict of Milan had also inaugurated the rise of Christendom, which may rightly be viewed as the end of the church of the New Testament and of the early apostles. 1700 years later, Christendom is still dying hard. Over the past century of war and devastation, and of massive people migration, our world has witnessed the rise and fall of secularist reactionism to Christendom's hegemony over human societies. But in parallel as well, we have been witnessing the ascent of new forms of religious fundamentalism and militantism. Not much has changed. History is cyclical. Michael Stroope's warning that

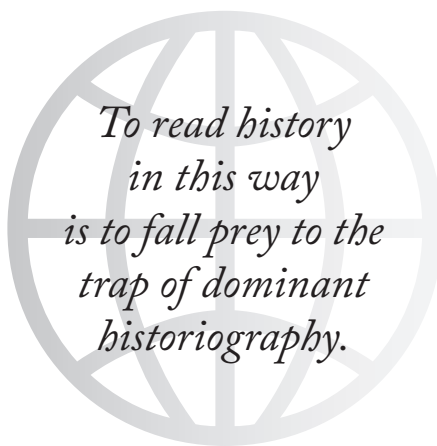
Western Christians will have to choose whether or not they will sojourn as aliens and pilgrims in the wasteland of what was once Christendom

is a quandary that Eastern Christians have had to face previously at several historical points. The history of the Eastern church's decline is a testimony to its repeated failure to make the right choices.

But to read history in this way is also to fall prey to the trap of dominant historiography. Do church historians tend to hear too loudly the voice of *royal* history? Indeed, even 1700 years later, we are still also able to trace a continuous line of witness-martyrs here and there, of silent *pilgrims* within the church, to use Stroope's own language. Pilgrim witnesses continue steadily throughout history mostly silent, and mostly undocumented by the historians of the "royal court." It is often those about whom we hear the least, those who never "write home," who carry out most faithfully the work of the kingdom.

In the early church of the 5th and 6th centuries, so richly documented by social historian Peter Brown, the image of the venerated martyr of the early church morphed into that of

the desert saint, the pilgrim towards whom populations flocked for comfort and counsel as a form of resistance to a rising and increasingly oppressive Christendom.³ At the height of the Fifth Crusade, in 1219, when mainstream Christianity was represented by armored knights and military conquest, Saint Francis of Assisi, who had embraced the vow of poverty, crossed the battle line with a companion to preach the gospel of peace to the Egyptian Sultan al-Kamil in the hope of converting him. One thinks as well of the 15th century Anabaptists who, at the height of the Western church's power, condemned any involvement of the church in war, violence, or political participation. We think of Karl



Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted Nazi Germany at a time when mainline German Protestantism had been co-opted by the regime. Many more examples of pilgrims can be found, who challenged peacefully the church's collusion with political power, conquest, and oppression.

When the metaphors of human power come crashing down in the public imagination, the biblical metaphors of the kingdom can find their way back into life. Children of the kingdom are pilgrims in society as the "salt" and "light" of witness. Though we are invited to embrace the humble status of a small "mustard seed" or of a small quantity of "leaven," these are the

seeds of hope and faith, the "leaven" whose effect on the dough becomes irresistible. At this heyday of global conflict, when the church has much to repent for its involvement in mission often complicit with colonialism in a post-colonial world, Christians may well have to decide whether we are willing to embrace once again the humble metaphors of the kingdom as a way of life, or simply delude ourselves in the conviction of infallibility and perpetuity.

Dialogue and Peacebuilding as Core Components of Kingdom Witness Today

My call to the missionary community is for a recalibration of our witness to meet the challenges of living in multifaith societies. Given the deepening chasm of understanding that dominates relations between various religious groups, and given the gravity of global conflicts in which religions are central actors, I believe that there cannot be true kingdom witness today that does not involve dialogue and peacebuilding. The problem with these two words is that they are often understood as being akin to "compromise" within Evangelical circles. Let us reflect briefly, therefore, on how we can avoid the sort of dialogue that leads to syncretistic apathy, while also avoiding any sort of polemical militancy. I have developed what I call the SEKAP Spectrum for Christian-Muslim interaction, which identifies five positions on a continuum between these two extremes. These positions are reflected in the SEKAP acronym, which stands for "Syncretistic," "Existential," "Kerygmatic," "Apologetic," and "Polemical." I have sought to argue that "Kerygmatic" interaction is the sort of kingdom witness most faithful to biblical teaching. As I have written elsewhere:

The kerygmatic approach to Christian-Muslim interaction is thus devoid of polemical aggressiveness, apologetic

defensiveness, existential adaptiveness, or syncretistic elusiveness... It needs essentially no militant enforcers, no fanatic defenders, no smart adapters, and no crafty revisers.⁴

As we reflect on the balancing role of dialogue and peacebuilding in our kerygmatic witness to the world we live in, metaphors of the kingdom may offer insight into this reflection. First, *kerygmatic witness is Christ-centered rather than Christianity-centered*. When we engage in kerygmatic witness, we disengage from the cosmic battle between religions. There is a disarming aspect to our engagement in conversation with Muslims as witnesses to Christ rather than as representatives of Christianity. When we witness to what we have experienced with Christ, we are inviting others to respond, like us, to God's invitation into relationship with himself. We are responding to Jesus' invitation in Matthew 5:13 for us to be the "salt of the earth." Though we are small, we are effective. We refuse to find confidence in the "pack mentality," where the salt is in excess and ruins the taste of the food. Yet we are also aware that if we "lose our saltiness" by failing to live out according to the distinctives of God's kingdom, then we might as well be "thrown out and trampled underfoot."

Second, *kerygmatic witness is supra-religious witness that moves us away from the mindset of triumphalistic Christendom*. The traditional mission mindset tends to count gains and losses, like one side engaged in conflict with another. How are we doing with achieving our strategy? What clusters of "unreached peoples" have yet to be conquered? By what year will we have achieved the "great commission?" 2020? 2025? 2050? But isn't this entire way of thinking absurd and futile, given the constant shifts in demographic and cultural realities resulting from mass migration, globalization, social media, and other such variables? Christ-centered supra-religious witness is meek rather than triumphalistic. It

Kerygmatic witness is Christ-centered rather than Christianity-centered—we disengage from the cosmic battle between religions.

is inviting rather than offensive. Like Christ-centeredness, supra-religiousness is disarming as well. As we put away from ourselves the false sense of duty that we ought to be defenders of Christianity and its doctrines, we are able to journey along humbly with our Muslim neighbors as fellow-travelers on a quest for God's light and love. In Matthew 5:14–16, Jesus tells us that if we are his disciples we are the "light of the world." As he clarifies the metaphor, he speaks of a town that cannot be hidden because it is built on a hill (v. 14). He speaks of a lamp that gives its light to everyone in the house because it is set on its stand rather than put under a bowl (v. 15). The imagery conveys the scene of a light that softly illuminates the way on a journey, or gently provides the light needed to discover truth in the dark. One does not get the sense of a strong headlight that bedazzles a passerby. The light that Jesus speaks of, and that must "shine before others" is, according to verse 16, our "good deeds" that lead our companions on the journey to "glorify [y]our Father in heaven." Jesus tells us that when we are "peacemakers" we will be called "children of God" (Matthew 5:9). What better way to give glory to our Father in heaven than by being recognized as his children?

Third, *kerygmatic witness is prophetic and scientifically honest*. Talk of dialogue and peacebuilding can communicate the impression that we are advancing "sweet talking" as an alternative to gospel witness. Dialogue can—and has indeed—often become an exchange of niceties with little implications for the gospel or even interest for people of faith. Kerygmatic dialogue, on the other hand, seeks to engage theologically and to do so on scientifically honest grounds.

While there is not space here to discuss this in great depth, suffice it to say that a kerygmatic approach to Muhammad and the Qur'an opts for a quest for the "historical Muhammad" as an alternative to the usual "Muhammad of faith and tradition." Based on the latest scientific findings in the revisionist school for the study of Islam, the traditional portrait of Muhammad preserved in the official prophetic biography (*Sirat Rasul Allah*), as well as the traditional method for the study of the Qur'an based on *hadith* and *asbab an-nuzul*—"occasions of the revelation"—are no longer viable. A kerygmatic witness is appreciative of Muhammad and the Qur'an because the historical event of their appearance on the world stage is intimately connected with the Judeo-Christian tradition in Arabia in the sixth century. A Christ-centered witness, however, turns down respectfully the notion of Muhammad's prophethood and of the Qur'an as a continuation or fulfillment of the biblical revelation, not because of any disdain for Muhammad and his book, but because of a firm belief in the finality of Christ as God's self-revelation and the achievement of our salvation at the cross.

The kingdom metaphor here may be that of the yeast. It is a tricky metaphor in the New Testament. In Matthew 16:6 and in 1 Corinthians 5:6, the yeast symbolizes false teaching. In Luke 12:1, it symbolizes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Yet in Matthew 13:31–33, both the yeast and the mustard seed represent a small quantity of good substance that transforms irresistibly and overwhelmingly an entire environment for the greater benefit of all those around. As we seek intellectually to engage with Muslims kerygmatically in search for the truth, we must be aware of the

dangers of false teaching and hypocrisy that we could fall into. But if we are steadfast, these humble seeds of truth could grow into a large tree in whose shade birds of many kinds can find rest and fellowship. The yeast and the mustard seed are kingdom metaphors that speak of the great impact of small ingredients. They invite us to work steadfastly for the common good of our societies.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

(Matthew 5:9) Kerygmatic witness is intentional in its proclamation of the “gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). Michael Stroope expresses it well:

Witness is not a synonym for *persuasion, argument, or coercion*. Witness runs in two directions, each compounding the other. Witness is both beholding and telling. To *behold* is to witness something that changes one’s existence. *Beholding* is more than seeing with physical eyes; it is to be captured by a vision of that which is revealed (apocalyptic), and thus hopeful and transformative. To *tell* is to do more than recount events with a line of argument or in a dispassionate manner; rather, *telling* is to convey with one’s words and life what has been seen and experienced.⁵

Building peace is more than a set of techniques and more than a methodology. It is part of the beatitudes, placing it at the heart of the life of the kingdom. Peacebuilding is first a way of living with others in community. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews intreats his readers (Hebrews 12:14), “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Paul does the same in Romans 12:18, encouraging the Romans, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” In Pauline thinking, practicing peaceful living also seems to be connected with what he refers to as the “ministry of reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5:18, which was given to us after God reconciled

us to himself through Christ and made us into new creations in Christ (also v. 17). The kingdom call for the children of God to be peacemakers and reconcilers has to come to terms with a long history of conflict between Christianity and Islam. If we are going to engage kerygmatically with hearts, hands, and minds, we need to understand how political conflict has affected the history of theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Disentangling Our Witness from a Civilizing Mission

Theologically, we must ponder nearly 1400 years of Christian-Muslim meta-dialogue, strewn with turning points



of political and military conflicts that have perpetually led to persecution. As children of the twenty-first century, heirs of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, of the rise of al-Qaeda and September 11, of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of the birth pangs of the “Arab Spring,” of the murderous havoc wreaked by ISIS, it is easy for us to accuse Islam of being a religion of violence and death. But we forget that it was Christian Byzantium that was the blueprint of Islam’s emergence, the model for its expansionist nature and appetite for conquest. Political Christianity was a towering religious expression that all but blocked any alternative pattern for the nascent Islamic movement of the seventh century. Amid

the realities of the time, for Islam to have emerged as a pacifist religious expression would have required a sheer miracle. It was at the intersection of religion and politics that the theological metadialogue between Christianity and Islam was born, and the persisting formulation of our theological relationship is an enduring witness to this politicized encounter.

The Eastward Crusades of the eleventh century and the Westward Reconquista, that grew in vigor around the same period and extended up to the end of the fifteenth century, triggered a shift and turning point in the Christian-Muslim theological discourse that reoriented the conversation from text-based exegesis to eisegetical proof-texting. The chief example of this shift occurred in the argument of *tabrif*, the Muslim accusation that Jews and Christians had corrupted their scriptures beyond repair. The Qur’an itself speaks of *tabrif* in the sense of taking words out of their intended context.⁶ Early Muslim interpreters accused Jews and Christians of committing *tabrif al-ma’na*—“corruption of meaning”—in other words, of misinterpreting their scriptures. It is in this way that they explained the emergence of doctrines incompatible with reason—according to their own patterns of reasoning, from otherwise divinely inspired texts. But by the time of the great conflicts of the eleventh century, Muslim exegetes had taken to distinguishing between *tabrif al-ma’na* and *tabrif al-lafz*—“corruption of meaning” and “corruption of text.” In this matrix, the accusation of the falsification of the biblical text was born.

As this argument reached a deadlock at the heart of conflict, so the witness of the church today needs to begin with the task of disentangling the Bible from our militant missions. Using what I call “legitimate hermeneutics,” in my book *Sacred Misinterpretation*,⁷ we need to enter the world of Muslim Qur’anic

exegesis to find precedent within the Muslim tradition for alternative ways that Muslims have considered and used the Judeo-Christian scriptures. I have demonstrated how, long before the argument came to a deadlock in the eleventh century, Muslim historians and theologians, such as al-Ya'qubi and Ibn Qutayba (both 9th century), used the Bible simply as a reliable source of historical information about biblical events and about Jesus. Ibn Qutayba, a well-respected theologian and hadith collector and critic of the ninth century, stood out in his use of gospel verses to determine the veracity of Muslim hadith traditions. Others, such as Imam al-Qasim ar-Rassi, the ninth-century founder of the Yemeni branch of the Zaydiyya movement, cited extensively from the Bible in his dialectical work against Christians, but never with the purpose of discrediting the text. He Islamized certain words, such as Father and Son, and sometimes altered anthropomorphical language, but he did so to make the text more palatable to a Muslim reader as a means of salvaging the text rather than to discredit it. The same phenomenon can be observed in al-Ya'qubi as well. Historically, Muslims did not start out their engagement with Christians by discrediting their scriptures. It was political conflict that brought us to this deadlock.

The European colonization of the majority of the Muslim world, beginning in the fifteenth century, was characterized by the exploitation of land, resources, and people. The fact that this colonial enterprise was undertaken by countries that purported to be Christian, and that it was coupled with an enthusiastic missionary movement, led to a great disillusionment with Christianity among the colonized. In the post-colonial era of the early twentieth century, Muslim intellectuals and reformers from previously-colonized nations struggled between the desire to modernize and industrialize, and the desire to hold on to tradition. They were drawn to the model that they had

Historically, Muslims did not start out by discrediting the Christian scriptures. It was political conflict that brought us to this deadlock.

experienced under the Europeans, yet they struggled with a sense of having been robbed of their own culture and religion by the hegemonic expression of Christianity that had accompanied the colonial endeavor. The conflict between cultures and civilizations developed into a conflict between opposing religions and their god. The rise of Zionism that led to the establishment of the State of Israel by the middle of the twentieth century did nothing to alleviate this sense that a cosmic battle was raging in the realm of the divine.

Our engagement with Islam today on questions of God's nature and attributes, and on the Trinity and the incarnation, necessitates that we disentangle God from our "civilizing" mission. It is hard to affirm a Triune God who dwells in eternal loving communion, whose desire to enter our world expressed itself supremely through the incarnation of the eternal Son in Jesus Christ, and whose self-giving love manifested itself extravagantly at the cross, when our history of missions has been so complicit with the subjugation of other human beings and the demonstration of such flagrant abuse of power. It will take more than a continued affirmation of propositional truths to convince Muslims that we serve a loving God who desires to embrace them and invite them into his heavenly kingdom.

Just as the role of the church today must consist in disentangling God from our "civilizing" mission, we must perhaps as well disentangle Christ from our apologetic mission. Our primary approach to dialogue has traditionally been the affirmation of propositional truths, about the Trinity and Christ's divinity, the incarnation and the cross. But what if we focused instead on the significance of "presence" and solidarity in suffering?

Will this sort of witness to "God with us" not be more powerful? Should not our propositional apologetics and dialectics give way to an incarnational life? What if our primary mode of living were love of friend and foe, to the point of being willing to lay down our life for them? Will this not be a more effective testimony to the cross as the expression of God's eternal act of self-giving? What if this Christlike life became the foundation of our relationships and conversations, replacing the smart and often dispassionate theological arguments, and what if this became the principal window into the nature of the Divine? Our multi-faith and multi-layered communities today beckon us to approach dialogue from the angle of invested lives that lead to understanding, rather than from the starting point of propositional truths that seek rhetorical triumph.⁸

As Christians and Muslims, we are heirs of a history of war and religious violence. When we ponder the violent expressions of Islam which have manifested over the past decades, we would do well to realize quite frightfully that we are looking at ourselves and our own history in the mirror. We are conceited if we pat ourselves on the back in the belief that the Christianity we have proclaimed and identified with throughout much of our history can offer any hope for a violent and desperate world. The only hope for a redemptive witness to Christ will begin with a disentangling of Muhammad and the Qur'an from our essentializing mission. When we lump Islam altogether under the aegis of violence and as an anti-Christ manifestation, we further deepen the chasm in our increasingly interconnected multifaith societies.

A Mature Witness Will Derive from a Mature Biblical Theology of Islam

Our understanding of Islam has tended to derive from intuitive notions acquired through personal experiences, through the populist discourse that dominates our media and many of our church pulpits, and through popular writings with an essentializing agenda. It suits us to perpetuate a one-sided and often simplistic understanding of Islam. Just as the demonization of a certain ethnic group is a useful tool of propaganda in the hands of a government, that precedes the conquest and subjugation of a population through war, so is the wholesale demonization of Islam and Muslims too often used as a polemical tool in pre-evangelism. The word “polemics” comes from Greek *polemos*, meaning “war” and “combat.” Some of our evangelistic methods flirt too closely with the methods of war. Our mission to Muslims, when it falls into the trap of essentialism, is often impulsive rather than thoughtful. And it results in methods that are often driven by pragmatism rather than theology.

The outcome is readily observed in three of the greatest controversies about mission methodologies currently raging in missionary circles: high-context Bible translation, the Insider Movement as an approach to church planting, and the legitimacy of dialogue as a vehicle for witness. Essentialists who demonize Islam wholesale tend to oppose vehemently all three approaches. If you view Muhammad as an anti-Christ figure who wrote a book with the intent of bringing down Judaism and Christianity, then you will naturally oppose the introduction of Qur’anic terminology into Bible translations. You will consider that the only path to true conversion is for a Muslim to renounce Islam as a Satanic trap, and will disciple them through

maximum extraction. And you will not want to touch interfaith dialogue with a six-foot pole. But if for a moment you consider that Muhammad may have belonged to a Judeo-Christian sect, who desired to reproduce the Judeo-Christian scriptures in a “clear Arabic tongue” as a sort of Qur’anic Midrashist,⁹ then you might consider it natural to integrate Qur’anic terms and concepts into your Bible translation. You may view the purpose of evangelism as conversion to Christ rather than to Christianity; discipleship as a process of journeying with a Muslim as they begin to reinterpret their tradition in light of the resurrected Christ. And you may realize



that dialogue and witness ought to be the two sides of an indivisible coin: *kerygma* and dialogue manifested through kerygmatic dialogue and dialogical kerygma.

The witness of the church today, I am convinced, needs to be rooted in the development of a thoughtful biblical theology of Islam, of the Qur’an, of Muhammad, and of Muslims. Outside a sophisticated, scientifically critical, intellectually honest, prophetically incisive, relationally hopeful, and biblically faithful treatment of Islam, our witness to Muslims will remain devoid of the meek and liberating power of Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, Kindle Edition, 2017), 374.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (London-New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2008), 250, quoting from Andrew G. Bostom, ed., *The Legacy of Jihad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), 611 (emphasis by Jenkins).

³ See especially one of Peter Brown’s earlier pieces on the subject, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

⁴ Martin Accad, “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach,” in *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry*, ed. Evelyne A. Reisacher (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012), 38.

⁵ Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, 371.

⁶ Four verses in the Qur’an contain the verb *harrafa*: al-Baqara 2:75, an-Nisa’ 4:46, and al-Ma’ida 5:13 and 41.

⁷ Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), Chapter 2.

⁸ These last lines are a paraphrase of a blog piece I wrote on May 5, 2016, “Jesus, Muslims and the Qur’an: in search for KERYGMATIC peacebuilding,” IMES blog (republished August 29, 2019).

⁹ The Midrashim (plural of Midrash) were expanded commentaries on the Torah, written by Jewish religious scholars, integrating extensive oral traditions with the text of scriptures.

Article Response

A Response to Martin Accad

by Harley Talman

Thank you, Martin for these enlightening and challenging thoughts for reaching across the Muslim-Christian divide. In my brief response I will highlight key points that I appreciate, pose a few questions and offer a small contribution of my own.

You have daringly contrasted Christendom with Christianity and Christianity with the kingdom of God, calling us to rejoice at the death of Christendom (which united Christianity with political and military power). I suspect you shocked some with your assertion that mission must even dispense with Christianity itself—at least when its mission is still complicit in colonialism, and when we make it a system of propositional doctrines which many Christians have substituted for the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom involves the way of life taught by Jesus, a life submitted to the authority of the Messiah. Many Christians are living the life of the kingdom, but many are not. On the other hand, others are living their lives with Christ as king, beyond the borders of Christianity.

Counter to mainstream evangelical mission, you boldly call for contemporary kerygmatic witness to put dialogue and peace-making back on the stage of inter-faith relations. Christianity can no longer be the king that we as Christian soldiers defend in the battle of religions. Instead, meek missionaries must offer supra-religious witness to Muslim pilgrims on their journey to the light of the world. But our humble witness must also be prophetic and academically honest.

As it relates to Muhammad and the Qur'an, I completely agree that the findings of current scholarship require us to reject the Muhammad of Islamic tradition that was based on unreliable Muslim biographies. But I have some questions:

1. Knowing how strongly Bible-believing Christians reacted to liberal scholars' rejection of the Jesus of the gospels in their quest for the "historical Jesus," might we expect Muslims to react even more negatively to our search for the "historical Muhammad"?¹
2. How can kerygmatic witness proclaim such a radical and offensive (to Muslims) truth in peace-making dialogue?
3. Have you been successful in doing this? If so, then what guidance can you offer us?

I concur that we should respect the "historical Muhammad" and the Qur'an due to their close connection to Judeo-Christian tradition in Arabia, and that we must respectfully disagree with Muslims that Muhammad and the Qur'an are a direct continuation or a fulfillment of biblical revelation. However, could we not take our stand upon what the Qur'an itself claims—that it should be interpreted as a *confirmation* of biblical revelation in an Arabic language (46:12)? Though this stands in stark contrast to the attitude that prevails among Muslims today, your outstanding monograph, *Sacred Misinterpretation*,² provides clear evidence that for four centuries Muslim scholars overwhelmingly approached the Bible as a reliable, uncorrupted text.

You demonstrate how political conflict led to theological enmity. Thank you for bringing to light that the political Christianity of the Byzantine Empire provided the template that shaped Muhammad's monotheistic movement into a competing political empire under an imperial religious system.

I also heartedly agree that dialogical focus on propositional truths about contested doctrines must shift to demonstration of incarnational, self-giving love. I suggest that we go even further by inviting Muslims to participate with us in expressing such love through joint service projects.

And while I unreservedly agree with the need for nonverbal demonstration of love, words are still needed. However, I would advocate that our propositional discussions focus on Jesus' emphasis in the great commission, recorded in Matthew, to "teach them to obey all that I commanded you." Instead of dialogue dominated by doctrinal discussions of the reliability of the Bible, the Trinity, or the deity of Christ, let us direct our attention to examining the teachings of Jesus, asking our Muslim friends:

- What did Jesus teach? How should it impact our own faith communities?
- Which of his commands do our two communities need to obey in our relations with each other?

It is through obeying Jesus' commands that Muslims can come to know who he really is. In John 14:21 Jesus promised, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will *reveal* myself to him."

Finally, I support your call for the development of a biblical theology of Islam, escaping the trap of essentialist views of Islam (as violent, demonic or of the anti-Christ), and instead considering the evidence for Muhammad belonging to a Jewish-Christian sect, or for his founding an ecumenical movement of monotheists that was later exploited by political rulers to unite the Arab empire under an imperial religion (just like Byzantine Christianity).

Biblical theologies that sanction Muslim conversion to Christ (as opposed to Christianity) can foster correction of the Islamic tradition to conform it to the revelatory light of Christ and the Bible rather than demanding its destruction.

Biblical theologies such as you call for may sanction Muslim conversion to Christ (as opposed to Christianity). They could foster correction of the Islamic tradition to conform it to the revelatory light of Christ and the Bible, rather than demanding its destruction. Such theologies will find Muslim friends, such as Abdullah Galadari, whose *Qur'anic Hermeneutics* accepts the Christology of the gospel of John.³

I say “Amen!” to Martin’s calling us to develop a biblical theology of the Qur’an, Muhammad and Muslims. But let us first count the cost. As Martin well knows, such attempts will be strongly criticized or attacked by others—if not by some from the Muslim community, then by others in the body of Christ. Martin reminds us: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But it is the peacemaking sons of God who also experience the final beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” May we be so blessed. **IJFM**

Harley Talman has worked with Muslims for over 35 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 Theological Seminary and a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary. He presently teaches Islamic studies at a graduate school.

Endnotes

¹ Martin later responded privately to my questions regarding discussing the “historical Muhammad” with Muslims. He indicated that it would not be well received, but that we must humbly speak the truth in love.

² Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

³ Abdullah Galadari, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018)